



Untitled, woodcut oil print.

My grandparents, that I haven't met, in the yard of the farmstead they were allocated to after borders were changed and they moved from what became Byelarusian Soviet Socialist Republic to Polish People's Republic. It was vacated by German people moving away at the end of the war. It was the second farmstead my grandfather lived at and worked in after relocating to this region. He will move one more time to another farmstead also vacated by German people where he will stay until his death.

What can it mean to come from a certain place and from certain people?

Reflections on around the question.

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Introduction

“White man, hear me! History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations. And it is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this. In great pain and terror one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is, and formed one’s point of view. In great pain and terror because, thereafter, one enters into battle with that historical creation, Oneself, and attempts to re-create oneself according to a principle more humane and more liberating: one begins the attempt to achieve a level of personal maturity and freedom which robs history of its tyrannical power, and also changes history.”¹

James Baldwin, *The White man’s guilt*

I would say that this quote above describes the best in short what am I trying to do here. I am trying to understand a little better what kind of historical creation am I. For a long time I did not think about it, I took things for granted. And when I would disagree with how things are, let's say with power relations at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań where I have studied previously, I would sometimes be told by people to whom I expressed my frustration: that’s how things are, this is how life is. Then Poland joined European Union and the United Kingdom and Ireland opened their borders for Polish citizens to come and work and live there without limits. About 3 million people left Poland in just a few years to work there. I also went there one summer, to a place a colleague from University arrived at in Ireland. I’ve met many people from different parts of the world and I was astonished at the wide variety of different life choices they have made. One could live in so many ways I felt.

¹ James Baldwin, “The White Man’s Guilt”, in *Collected essays*, Literary Classics of the United States, New York, 1998, p. 722-723.

I'd like to recall an anecdote of meeting a person who impressed me a lot. When I arrived in Dublin I needed to wait for a bus that would take me to my final destination till the morning. I've spent the night wandering the streets. One of the people I've met was a man, I'd say somewhere in the middle of his life, who sat down to talk with me. He told me he lives in a shelter for the homeless, gets allowance money that he spends on weed and writes poetry that he then read to me. This was about 15 years ago, so I am not sure, but the impression I carried away from it was that he has chosen this way of living to his satisfaction. Although one can imagine there to be greater complexity to that situation, the possibility of making such a choice and declaring it as one was astonishing for me at the time. To challenge the societal norms and imaginarium, to shed the feelings of shame and defeat that could be ascribed to such position and to declare one's independence from them, even temporarily, was an impressive feat in my eyes.

This whole experience of visiting Ireland was like breathing fresh air, and when back in Poland I felt I was suffocating. I wanted to be out there and explore further the possibilities. Soon I left for Britain and decided that it does not matter where I was born, it was purely accidental and I can make of myself whatever I wanted. Years passed, and one time I left for Tunisia, most northern land in the African continent. It was the first time I have stayed longer outside Europe. I didn't know the local language, I didn't understand the body language and didn't know what were the points of reference. Gradually it led me to wonder what has shaped me, what are the things in my imagination by which I am taking my decisions, how am I accustomed to certain ways of human interactions, where did these things come from and what is their meaning.

The difference between the way we have found things to be and the way we think they are supposed to be is pointed out by Professor of History of Consciousness at University of California, Santa Cruz, Angela Davis in her lecture "How does change happen?" Davis talks about how the legal form of segregation was disestablished. Not how racism was abolished, as she underlines, but the legal structure that overlooked its implementation in everyday lives. Davis points out that it did not happen because of the epiphanies of those in power to make such decisions but because "ordinary people became collectively aware of themselves as potential agents of social change, as holding within their collective hands the power to create the new world."² Professor goes on to recall the moment in her childhood, when she would cry

² Davis, Angela. *How does change happen?*, Lecture at The Women's Resource and Research Center at the University of California. 2006. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pc6RHtEbiOA>

because she couldn't go to some places, and her mother explains to her racism and segregation: "This is not the way things are supposed to be. This might be the way they are now, but they are not supposed to be this way."

When having such realisation, one might enter, like Baldwin wrote, the battle with historically created structures. I think that Angela Davis's Mum's words also show the importance of how we are addressing that amongst each other. Saying "that is how things are" and in this way proposing acceptance and subjugation to the structures we arrive to in this world, or saying "this is not the way things are supposed to be", that can nourish acting towards establishing of a new order, choosing one of these two approaches can make a difference.

In the dark

"There is nothing degrading in our fundamental incapacity to lay bare all the particulars of our fate. If it were any different, if that chaotic richness, in the presence of which our faculties are like a circle of flashlight in the darkness, did not exist, we would not constantly be aspiring to form achieved by a process of elimination, and probably the art of writing would disappear. It is enough that we realize to what extent thought and word are incommensurable with reality. Then it is possible to set one's limits consciously."³

Searching for historical and theoretical roots, to borrow the title of Minna Henriksson's and Nora Sternfeld's seminar, of my imaginarium I have turned for the first time more consciously towards that problem. I wasn't sure where or how to start. I thought I would like to get to know my parents better, learn more about their parents all of whom passed away already. I thought I needed to look back at my education, (hi)stories and the meanings coming from them. Also I wanted to turn to people who were on similar quest and see what their learnings were.

I would like to better describe the point where I see myself at the moment in that search. Perhaps inspired by Czesław Miłosz's image I could compare it to entering the room in complete darkness. I am trying to orient myself in the space, reaching out and feeling the objects. Finding many I try to think about which are the most important for me in answering this question. I try to

³ Czesław Miłosz, *Native realm, A search for self definition*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1968, p. 5.

go back to those and get to know them better and then in this text give a sense of my perception of them and the importance they have for me, and might have for others. I am convinced that they are connected with each other, but the nature of their connections is at times vague even for me, so I am unable to throw sufficient light to show it right now. Points of this work can be like parts of a map that are revealed but suspended in space of territories that are still opaque. One knows that they are part of the same land, but one doesn't know how the way from one to another looks like. Is there a path, are there rocks between them, or a forest, a swamp maybe? In this way in the eyes of a generous reader and/or someone with whom what I write resonates, these can be like words, lines or strophas of a poem, that have a lot of space between them and leave it to the reader to make the connections, that can be multiple. I can also imagine that a reader might feel lost in it and get impatient and irritated. And if you will have such experience I'd like to apologize to you that I was not able to articulate things better at this time.

After a few years I feel I am at the beginning, trying to recognize the scope of the search and the hubs of problems that I find important to learn more about. As you will see, some of them I've spent more time getting to know about, some others are only touched on, and although I give importance to them, and therefore place them here, they are not well elaborated yet. I would say that I am scratching the surface, and some of the scratches uncovered more. It is another question of cognition and how far can one really get in that search. I guess that the span of our lives, tools we use, time we can dedicate to that work and other circumstances set their limits. It is a process and this is its registration, in this way it is also diaristic, showing where it is at this point in time.

Right and wrong

I'm also looking for the form which can be helpful in addressing the problems I am dealing with. The form I am mainly struggling with is the argumentative form of trying to establish one's findings as truths beyond doubt. Paola de Ramos in the opening pages of her Master's thesis "Mask's and identities. A journey" wrote:

"Como escrever sem criar verdades?

How to write without creating truths?

How to think without creating truths?

Como pensar sem criar verdades?*

Apenas uma única verdade
Apenas uma única pessoa
Apenas uma única identidade
Apenas uma única cara
Apenas uma única verdade
Nesse mundo de possibilidades

para eu estar certa,

você precisa estar errada?

Only one truth
Only one person
Only one identity
Only one face
Only one truth
On this world of possibilities

for me to be right,

do you need to be wrong ?"⁴

I have made an attempt in my own writing to depart from and challenge the right and wrong dichotomy, but I also do think that I did not overcome it. That is my opinion another aspect of entering the battle with the historical creation, that of universal objective truth, the hold it has on the mind, how it works and how it is being executed. The single truth taken to its extreme brings to my mind monotheistic religions and how some iterations of them can create 0 and 1 type of mathematical in a sense division between believers and nonbelievers, those deserving salvation and those deserving damnation. It also evokes the communist revolution and sharp forms it took of right and wrong that cost innumerable lives.

I do believe it also appears under new disguises in the new calls for more just societies, at times convoluted, hidden, disguised, hard to identify yet wanting to reign once again to put some in

⁴ Paola Vernizzi de Ramos, "Mask's and identities. A journey", 2018.
<https://paoladeramos.wixsite.com/masksidentities>

power and make some others powerless. As Witold Gombrowicz wrote “Gentle ideas are pregnant with mountains of corpses.”

That form I am struggling against, that I cannot define or delineate well yet, finds good expression in the text by de Ramos. It is the oneness, the perception that we are all one and the same, that can be used in the fight for human rights as well as for extreme violence. It can be an argument to do away with existing forms of discrimination towards groups of people, as well as it can form basis for assumptions that what is good for us is good for others, that how we think and feel must be the way others do, or they are in the wrong.

De Ramos breaks this oneness in her text by using parallelly English and Portuguese. I think that it is possible to notice that when we speak with someone who does not know our first language, we can remain in some way invisible to that person. Whole world of concepts and communicative possibilities that are part of us is lost to them. These two texts exist parallelly, but if we don't know Portuguese one of them might remain invisible to us. We could assume that it is a straight translation and nothing is lost, but that would be absorbing Portuguese and in this way erasing it. It would be good then to understand limits of what one can enter and understand, keep respectful distance thinking that apart from our knowing there is much larger not knowing. We can assume and imagine a lot of things but we don't know what people's (hi)story is until they tell us.

Bag for the things you like and need

There could be different kinds of stories Ursula Le Guin tells us in “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction” essay. In admirably skillful way of operating with words and images they evoke she makes an argument for a different kind of story telling than that of a spearheaded trajectory that proceeds in a linear way from the beginning to an end, thriving on conflict and ending with, how Le Guin puts it, this spear of a story pinning something, killing it. I think that Jiddu Krishnamurti can help us in understanding this last part. In his book “Freedom from the known” he describes truth as something that is in constant movement and so is unattainable in a way that one could grab it and have it once for all, or even for a short while as a matter of fact. Once pinned down it becomes dead, and it is not truth anymore, as truth is alive. When you pin it, it is already somewhere else. “A man who knows what it is to have humility is a vain man” he states towards the end of the book. This points in my opinion towards the importance of being, of the process, of experiencing rather than having, holding, attaining in some definitive way.

Recalling the famous scene from “Space odyssey 2001” movie, where bone used to kill a fellow apeman is thrown up into the air and in cross dissolve editing changes into floating spaceship, Ursula Le Guin writes how she cannot and wouldn’t want to feel as a part of humanity whose story is described in this way. It’s defining moment being a long tool for hitting, killing, bashing, continuing as she writes, with how “Cain fell on Abel and how the bomb fell on Nagasaki and how the burning jelly fell on the villagers”.⁵ There can be, and as she asserts, there is another kind of story. Perhaps it’s sometimes harder to see, and harder to tell, as the linear story of the hunter captured our imaginations and we all seem to be part of it now:

“The mammoth hunters spectacularly occupy the cave wall and the mind, but what we actually did to stay alive and fat was gather seeds, roots, sprouts, shoots, leaves, nuts, berries, fruits, and grains, adding bugs and mollusks and netting or snaring birds, fish, rats, rabbits, and other tuskless small fry to up the protein.”⁶

In a similar way, as I will later claim, other stories occupy our minds. As in Polish context the mammoth hunters of our imagination are the aristocracy and their history, while most of us come from peasantry that lived very different lives with very different concerns. And so, Le Guin argues, our lives and concerns where and still are and/or can be very different too:

“It is hard to tell a really gripping tale of how I wrested a wild-oat seed from its husk, and then another, and then another, and then another, and then another, and then I scratched my gnat bites, and Ool said something funny, and we went to the creek and got a drink and watched newts for a while, and then I found another patch of oats....”⁷

Yes, it is a different way of telling a story, a different mode of being one could say. That is what made me feel at home in Leslie Marmon Silko novels. For the first time I could feel to such a degree part of something, to use Ursula Le Guin’s words, part of humanity. Jahner in her article on Silko’s novel describes it as focusing on experiencing rather than action, that she connects to oral storytelling.

This way of wandering around, looking around, gathering food, medicine, objects that we find useful, beautiful or just interesting, stopping for anecdote, laugh and conversation is much

⁵ Ursula Le Guin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction”, 1986, p. 5.

https://www.academia.edu/17313163/The_Carrier_Bag_Theory_of_Fiction_-_Ursula_K._Le_Guin

⁶ Ibidem, p.1.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 2.

closer to me than a solid linear narrative, that omits, edits out all things that could make it diluted, “weaker” and subvert its hypnotic and dominating power. Rather than beginning, conflict, resolution (solution) and the end I would like to see it as a continuing process that goes beyond beginning and end, you just enter it at some point and leave at another.

And so in my search I wandered to different areas, spent more time in some of them, little less in others, but wanting to come back there. However, I am a person that just arrived at this patch of land, and does not know yet which plants are edible, which to use for medicine, and I only have started to learn that. I am looking for knowledge from those who have been here longer, who seem to know more, and I am developing my own bond with this environment.

For a few years now every summer I try to visit my cousin Arek who stays on the hill he inherited from his father, my uncle from my mother’s side. He digs the hill to sell the sand for the building sites. Some members of the family seem not to be content about that, as the “family hill” changes. My cousin graduated in forestry studies, and from conversations with him I know how he cherishes plants and animals. Being on that hill for five days a week, mostly alone, he makes many observations he sometimes shares with me. Once he told me about rabbits. When I arrive there, this hill is full of rabbits and rabbit holes, and whoever comes to visit him by car is worried that rabbits will bite through some crucial cables going underneath the car and they’ll be grounded and in trouble. The rabbit, he told me, does not want to eat the same herb all day long. It wants to eat about a hundred different plants a day. With monoculture farming, meadows shrinking and foxes growing in numbers due to eliminating rabies, the rabbit population is not thriving at the moment.

Like the rabbit looking for diverse nutrition for the well being, I didn’t want to write a monograph. Rather, I wanted to wander, see what is out there in my field of interest, and come back, open my carrier bag and show you what I have found. This makes it harder for the reader I guess to determine if they are even interested in what I have brought, and you might be interested in some of the things, and find some other irrelevant. To me they are all important and in some way, that is not entirely clear also for me now, they fit together. Somewhere, in another container I have put away some findings I am not going to share here. I’ve brought you what I think is the most precious, and what I am ready to share now.

Appendix

After the main body of the text you can find the Appendix. It consists of works I have been doing around the subject for the last three years. These are exercises and try outs done at the courses at the University, for publications and events as well as for the Master's Thesis exhibition that was supposed to take place at the time of the Thesis presentations. As the exhibition was cancelled I have focused mostly on the text and I did not develop a body of work that I would like to be considered on the equal basis with the written part. I would like it to be seen as a supplement, as work under development that, I hope, will throw additional light at problems touched on in the text.

1. Place in the state and place in the world

1.1. Like your life depends on it

“Nie pakidajcie z mowy naszej białaruskiej kab nie umierli!

- Don't abandon our belarusian language, so it would not die? - I'm asking.
- No! Read it carefully: Don't abandon our belarusian language, so you wouldn't die. [translation mine - later T. M.]”⁸

Małgorzata Szejnert's book “Usypać Góry. Historie z Polesia” (“To build mountains. Stories from Polesie”, T. M.)⁹ was published in 2015. It is literary reportage¹⁰ on Polesie, region that today is in Belarus, and earlier over the course of several centuries was part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Russia and of Polish states. Polish people acted in this region, and towards northern east, east and southern east as colonizers.¹¹ My father's parents come from a place lying north east of Polesie. Knowing next to nothing about the place they came from, and not knowing any literary sources about it, pondering on my question, I thought that it is at least not so far from where they came from, and I reached for this book keenly.

After reading it there was one thing in it that stayed with me continuously: the local identity that people in Polesie had. They did not identify themselves along national lines, but

⁸ Małgorzata Szejnert, *Usypać góry. Historie z Polesia*, 2015, chapter 3: Trzeci grzech [The third sin, T.M.]. If the page number is not given I have used a digital copy of the text like .mobi format that makes consistent pagination impossible, therefore chapter and subchapter are given if possible.

⁹ Translation after announcement of meeting with the author on Local Life Kraków website: <https://www.local-life.com/krakow/events/2668-meeting-with-malgorzata-szejnert-author-of-usypac-gory-historie-z-polesia> There are several translations of the book's title to English one can find, this one is in my opinion translates the best the meaning of the title.

¹⁰ Literary reportage is a widely recognized literary genre in Poland and elsewhere. While in English “nonfiction” seems to be the umbrella term for any writing that is not placing itself in the fiction section, literary reportage is a narrower term. It refers to writing that combines journalistic reporting and literary devices: “Literature embraces images, metaphors and allegories, and is nourished by the poetic impact of language. Literature uses rhythm. Literature can use cuts and montages like a film. Literature draws energy through condensation. Literature touches dimensions of actuality which journalism avoids—such as psychology, visions and introspection, emotion and imaginary reality—and is sensitive to the effects of geography on human modes, behaviors, and traditions.” For further elaboration of that see short essay at Lettre Ulysses Award for The Art of Reportage website: https://www.lettre-ulysses-award.org/about/Art_of_Reportage.html

¹¹ That is not a widely acknowledged perspective in Poland. Established facts in polish historiography have been reviewed through postcolonial lense by Jan Sowa in his book *The King's Phantom Body. A Peripheral Struggle with Modern Form* in chapter “Rzeczpospolita postkolonialna” [Postcolonial republic - T.M.], p. 431.

simply would say I am Poleszuk (grammatical form informing that person is living in or is from Polesie). One could argue that because it is mostly swamps and marshlands, and was difficult to access and to penetrate, the local dialects and ways of life changed less than in regions around them. I would like to look closer at what constitutes this kind of sense of belonging that does not preoccupy itself as much with nation states and its structures but is more involved with making sense of its direct surroundings.

Second chapter in that book, "Trzeci grzech" (The third sin - T. M.)¹², is among other things, treating about Symonowicze village in western part of Polesie and professor of linguistics Fiodor Daniłowicz Klimczuk, who was born and grew up there. Today the village is largely abandoned, young people, like professor himself did, left for the cities. There is a group of older people living there, who "always had trouble with reading, and now they are not seeing so well anymore." [T. M.]¹³ Big part of his scientific work is dedicated to the research and recording of Polesie dialects. Szejnert asks Klimczuk:

- "Professor, for whom did you make this translation?
- Which one?
- You have translated the New Testament to the language of your village. For whom?

Fiodor Daniłowicz is looking at me with very blue eyes and does not answer. There is no reprimand in his eyes, rather a surprise. He thinks about it for a while, hesitates, finally resigns.

- I don't know - he replied embarrassed." [T. M.]

This was something the professor undertook in his own time.

What are the possible meanings of professor Klimczuk's gesture? Szejnert soon adds that it is common among linguists to think that dialect becomes a language when it has its Bible. Later in that chapter we learn of Franciszek Skaryna, born in 1490, who is considered to be the father of Belarusian language. Skaryna translated the Bible from Old Church Slavonic to Old Belarusian.

World in which Klimczuk grew up, his parents did, and their parents did, is disappearing, he is well aware of that. He recorded 270 songs his mother sung in several languages, that have been sung while working, until ways of working have changed and this practice has stopped. Using means that he has, he is preserving this passing world best to his abilities. Text of the Bible is text of lived faith that survived for a long time, no matter the actual level of

¹² The third sin according to Anastazja, the mother of the protagonist of that chapter In Szejnert's book professor Klimczuk, after "do not kill" and "do not steal" is "do not forget the speech of your kinfolk".

¹³ Szejnert, "Usypać...", third chapter.

engagement with it, it is there, repeated, referred to. He takes the world of his village into his hands, and freezes that moment of it that he encountered, closes it in the artefact of the Bible, artefact that seems to last through time and maybe can carry through time the world of Symonowicze village. .

His friend Wiaczesław Werenicz, also Poleszuk, worked for 25 years on Polesie Archive, recording in it:

“names of fields, rivers, meadows, mires, surnames, nicknames, traces of churches that are not there anymore, he counted inhabitants, houses and pieces of granted land, he collected inscriptions from the graves. Hundreds, if not thousands of informers whom he interviewed in their farmyards and in their homes, in 140 villages, defining for him with words environment in which they live in, going as far as their memory could reach. For the local people, those who remained in the villages visited by Werenicz, and for those, who might go back there one day, the knowledge preserved in the “Archive...” may serve as protection from complete uprooting.” [T. M.]¹⁴

This is practical reasoning that serves in my opinion as an attempt at justifying enormous efforts both Werenicz and Klimczuk took, rationally. Currently it is not easy to imagine movement of people back to the villages or in search of their lost world. Perhaps they are not concerned so closely with the scale or popularity of such a movement, nor with time, at least not in its immediate sense connected to being effective. Maybe one or a few people over the years who reach for it to root themselves will make the effort more than worthwhile. Perhaps like translating the New Testament into the language of Symonowicze village, these gestures they make are beyond themselves, they can't help it or find satisfactory terms to justify it. Perhaps it cannot be explained with concepts and language of “rational” and “modern” society. There is no place in it for them. It is inexpressible. But it also proved to be an unstoppable drive, an imperative guiding their actions. Perhaps it testifies to the strength of the bond with the world of the village of Symonowicze and with that of Polesie.

Swietłana Tolstoj wrote an essay about homeland¹⁵ in slavic folk traditions:

“My colleague and friend F. D. Klimczuk, who comes from Polesie, recalled that his grandpa considered all eastern Slavs, and also Serbs and Bulgarians, so all

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ I'm translating here Polish word “ojczyzna” as homeland, even though it translates directly as fatherland. In its application today it mostly refers to native land. Just as “fatherland” “ojczyzna” is more loaded with emotions and patriotism than for example “place of origin”.

orthodox Slavs to be “kinfolk” and called them “ruskies”, while his mother called ruskies all the people whom speech she could understand, including Polish.

According to Swietłana Tolstoj, contemporary conception of homeland has ideological, historical and political character, it's connected to the state, while traditional, folk understanding of it is connected to the place of a person in the world and in the cosmos.” [T.M.]¹⁶

Perhaps both Klimczuk and Woronicz, good friends (Klimczuk was one of the people who finished working on “Archiwum Poleskie (Belarussian - Poleskij archiw, English - Polesie Archive)” after Wiaczesław died before completing major part of it), with their endeavours and engagement that exceeded the demands of their professions, fought to sustain those two things: sense of belonging to the place in this world, and relating to it, even in part, from that perspective, and perhaps it's language and meanings it carried with it served to make sense of being in that place, and coming from it. So these movements they made, that could be seen as going against the current, current that brings change and obliterates everything, were crucial to them, perhaps their existence depended on it.

In my judgment what they did was not going against the current, at least not in the sense of going against the natural order of things, but was rather an instinct of self preservation in circumstances in which their work might seem as futile as tilting at windmills, as trying to uphold drying branch that is bound to fall, or fighting against the flow of time, insisting on remembering things that crumble into dust in our hands. In my opinion, their way can be the way, perhaps not forward, but to the side.

1.2. Nostalgia - time out of joint

One way to dismiss the actions of these two men is to simply call it nostalgia. In its common understanding nostalgia can be seen as incurable longing for lost home and is often seen as living in the past, being stuck in the past, being a prisoner of the past. As it is widely recognized as an existing affect it would seem it is visiting at times many of us. If it is too pronounced in someone's behaviour, it can be seen as an undesirable condition. Something

¹⁶ Ibid. Quotation in Szejnert's text from Swietłana N. Tolstaja, “Ojczyzna w ludowej tradycji słowiańskiej”, in *Pojęcie Ojczyzny we współczesnych językach europejskich*, red. Jerzy Bartmiński, Lublin 1993.

that might prevent people from being present, from taking charge of their current situation and from building the future.

Svetlana Boym in her entry on nostalgia in *Atlas of Transformation* by looking closely at it opens it up to understanding it in several different ways that are departing from this common conception of it. Firstly she points to how it is not an antimodern sentiment, but in actuality can be considered as part of modernism¹⁷, or as an effect that modernism entails. The concepts of irreversible march of history and progress are putting immense pressure on “the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams.”¹⁸ Precise measurement of time (clocks), labour paid by the hour, calendars and planning according to them, are constructs that leave little space for “time out of time”¹⁹, for taking the time, for just “being there” if you will rather than “doing very important work”, fulfilling tasks. In this way, nostalgia becomes a critical and/or rebellious movement against the confines of time in the way it is constructed in modernism. Boym brings up nostalgia’s utopian dimension, not directed to the future and not at the past, but rather sideways. In this way it can serve as a tool for exploring other possibilities then those forming the status quo. It’s potential lies in turning away from the dominating project of a culture and picking up on threads that it may have pushed aside or obliterated. It does not necessarily mean turning one’s back on the world and diving into oblivious fantasies. In what Boym calls off-modern tradition, of which nostalgia can be seen as part of, “reflection and longing, estrangement and affection go together.”²⁰ Perhaps that could mean not forgetting about the past, but paying attention to it in a way that is helpful for us in forming our ideas and actions towards a desirable future.

Another aspect of nostalgia that could support such thinking is that as Boym states “unlike melancholia, which confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness, nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory.”²¹ That charges it with political potentiality as an affect that can take part in shaping social rules of interaction, curving out spaces for cultures and histories of minorities, enriching and bringing variety to dominating narratives. In this way it is

¹⁷ References Boym is using are European and North American, so it is safe to assume in my opinion that words modern, modernity and modernism refer to a group of phenomenons accompanying historical development of these societies.

¹⁸ Svetlana Boym, Nostalgia, *Atlas of Transformation* website:

<http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/n/nostalgia/nostalgia-svetlana-boym.html>

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Ibidem.

sapping the dominance for it to crumble like a sand castle sapped by the sea, and yet not for its destruction but for its benefit. Coming down from delusions of superiority could be a step towards acknowledging the dignity of every person, no matter their nationality, body, language, religion, way of being and so on.

1.3. Timeless time

What timeless time unaffected by schedules and clocks could be? At one point it became like a test for me to see how busy I am, and do I live a “good life” or am I just running through it, to see if I had time during the day to look at the clouds and how they are passing, do I have it in me to see how branches move in the wind, can I find the space to look at the water in the sea. It seems to me one needs a certain state of mind to even engage in this kind of activities. A state that does not necessarily come with a simple switch, but needs to be taken care of all the time, nurtured, sustained. There can be days, weeks, it’s somehow uncomfortable to admit it but even much longer periods in which I could go without doing these kinds of things. Going from one task to another, doing things that seem important, yet soon not remembering what was it that they were about. Perhaps that might be why often the moments of cycling somewhere come back in my mind. I would not call them precious, they don’t include any action that could be called extraordinary, special or spectacular, it is more of a “happening”, I’m just somewhere, seeing my surroundings, being there.

The place these moments occupy in my memory is that of existence. I was there, it has happened, everything else falls in the background: am I currently in a relationship or not, where do I live, what country I’m in, where do I work, what I am worrying about these days. It is some other way of being in the world. I don’t see myself then through relationships with other people (son, friend, partner etc.), not through a readable role in the society (student, worker, volunteer etc.), not through the cultural context of my surroundings (Finnish, Polish, Tunisian etc.) and not through my current preoccupations, be it emotional, intellectual. I can just be there.

Perhaps I can throw a better light on it through talking about another situation. Three years ago I travelled for the last time as what European Union institutions would call an economic migrant. I arrived in Norway and got a job as a waiter in a restaurant. In the casual small talks that I would exchange with the customers people would ask me where I am from, tell me that it would be good for me to learn Norwegian etc. I’ve been in that situation before, this

time however I felt that I don't want to experience this feeling anymore, when I feel like being told: "you are not from here", "you need to adjust to our ways". That is not an accusation towards Norwegian people, I'd just like to describe my personal experience here. In front of a largely empty old hotel that now served as lodging quarters for me and a couple of more people from abroad who came to work here, there was a tree growing in the yard. When I sat in my room, contemplating these "you are not at home here" messages I would receive, I thought that for the tree it does not seem to matter. That I can just be here. Unquestioned, uninquired, uninterrupted. The same when we took hikes with my friend in nearby hills. Not meeting anyone, no one asking us any questions. I could be at home there. Experience of nature there became part of me and shapes me still now.

In this way it is unlike many other events in life, whose meaning changes over time, is uncertain. The life choices, the path taken in life, these can be arranged and rearranged retrospectively in many ways, depending what story we'll choose to tell based on our life's events. Often we would be omitting and obscuring small things that cannot fit into the flow of narrative, among them moments like cycling or hiking. And yet these are crucial for me, these moments built me in some decisive way, making me who I am and how I am.

Wisława Szymborska wrote a poem that can get me closer to delineating what it is that I mean. It touches on some aspects of it, it can be one of the entry points into the subject matter. Here it is:

No title required

It has come to this: I'm sitting under a tree
beside a river
on a sunny morning.
It's an insignificant event
and won't go down in history.
It's not battles and pacts,
where motives are scrutinized,
or noteworthy tyrannicides.

And yet I'm sitting by this river, that's a fact.
And since I'm here
I must have come from somewhere,
and before that
I must have turned up in many other places,
exactly like the conquerors of nations

before setting sail.

Even a passing moment has its fertile past,
it's Friday before Saturday,
it's May before June.
Its horizons are no less real
than those that a marshal's field glasses might scan.

This tree is a poplar that's been rooted here for years.
The river is the Raba; it didn't spring up yesterday.
The path leading through the bushes
wasn't beaten last week.
The wind had to blow the clouds here
before it could blow them away.

And though nothing much is going on nearby,
the world is no poorer in details for that.
It's just as grounded, just as definite
as when migrating races held it captive.

Conspiracies aren't the only things shrouded in silence.
Retinues of reasons don't trail coronations alone.
Anniversaries of revolutions may roll around,
but so do oval pebbles encircling the bay.

The tapestry of circumstance is intricate and dense.
Ants stitching in the grass.
The grass sewn into the ground.
The pattern of a wave being needled by a twig.

So it happens that I am and look.
Above me a white butterfly is fluttering through the air
on wings that are its alone,
and a shadow skims through my hands
that is none other than itself, no one else's but its own.

When I see such things, I'm no longer sure
that what's important
is more important than what's not.²²

²² Wisława Szymborska, "No title required in Poems New and Collected 1957-1997, trans. S. Baranczak and C. Cavanagh, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston, 2000.
<http://sacompassion.net/poem-no-title-required-by-wislawa-szymborska/>

Helpful in commenting on the poem can be what Sławomir Sikora wrote in his article on Jana Sevcikova's film "Gyumri" referring to Kirsten Hustrup's differentiation of memory and history. The former, he writes,

"seems older, strongly binded with orality, emotions and body, the latter trusts more in writing and logical linear order. First one is closer to the myth, the second one often leans towards ideology (understood widely here, as giving faith into certain procedures and assumptions). The first one keeps human [individual] perspective (individual experience), second one is often placed within reach of external, objectivising perspective, external (enforced, objective) view. Lastly, what's important in this case, the first one sometimes is the perspective of the defeated (...), the second one often serves the victors. It became clear by now that it would not be easy to draw a clear line between those two perspectives."

[T.M.]²³

By overlaying these perspectives, superimposing them one on another, giving them similar volume in words in the poem, using the categories of one of them to describe the other, Szymborska weaves the calendar time and seeming timelessness together, making them as if worth each other. This has great ecological potential. There is a movement in the poem to decentralize human perspective. There is the importance of the human race and its civilization, understood from Christian perspective of humans being on the top of the ladder of earthly beings. Humans who are abstracted from the earthly life in a way, as earth has been given to them to use by someone else (God), and they are temporarily here, just passing through, on the way to paradise (is it going to be on earth? In accordance with common imagination God Almighty can fix it instantly), and moreover it is the afterlife that is real life, while this earthly life is just a brief moment of existence full of inner (the struggles of the conscience) and outer (life's circumstances) difficulties. The poem opens the possibility that the history of elements in our surroundings could be of equal importance. It takes away perhaps excessive pride and glory of human "achievements" through putting them next to wonders of where we are, amongst stones, trees, water, grass, clouds. This could be a step to approaching the river bank on which the lyrical subject stands with care and respect. Instead of thinking of how the river can be regulated to serve the human needs to become an element in the glorious history of humankind, what

²³ Sławomir Sikora, *Żywe pomniki. Pamięć i zapomnienie w filmie Gyumri*. [Living monuments. Memory and forgetting in film Gyumri - T.M.], *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 69 (2010).

could enter consideration is this environment itself, and multiple consequences of any intervention in it. Consequences that are far too complex for our human capacity to grasp fully. Acknowledging that we could be much more careful in our interactions with the natural world.

I would like to claim that the poem also has a political potential: "Nostalgia," writes Boym, "is not merely an expression of local longing, but the result of a new understanding of time and space that made the division into "local" and "universal" possible."²⁴ In her poem Szymborska, we could say, objectivises personal memory, remerries local and universal, transgressing, if only for a moment, moment of a doubt, that division. This moment, once experienced, can have irreversible consequences of not believing, not trusting larger ideologies. It has the subversive power of questioning what is being passed on to us as important, and what is being dismissed as meaningless. It opens a crack, towards a space maybe, where we could construct hierarchies of importance of our own. Maybe I could say I am at home in the world no matter what limits are being thrust upon me.

²⁴ Boym, op. cit.

2. When life amounts to something and when it amounts to nothing

2.1. To have memory/history and to lack it

“...when the last witness of Russian
prison camps in the Carpatian
homeland of the Vagash hills, of
Ruthenian folklore, of human memory
dies, the graveyards will still be there,
where the bodies of Ruthenians rest
on the bodies of Sudeten Germans,
turning to dust together.”²⁵

Jana Ševčíková made over the course of 5 years a film on Ruthenians, people living in subcarpathian region stretching over the borders of four states: Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania and Poland. Over the course of the twentieth century lands they inhabit have also been part of Austro-Hungarian Empire, Russian Empire, Hungary and Soviet Union. These people have “continuously undergone a redefinition of borders and identities”.²⁶ This can be said to a lesser or higher degree about many communities throughout the Eastern Europe.

In an attempt to try to describe what this film is about, I could say that it is about Jakub Popovič through what is told about him by people who knew him, while he was still alive. But even more it is a spoken and visual account of the place and the people he lived among some years ago. Memories and recollections of him appear to be a way to show the life of a community in its different aspects. It brings up questions of what one can call home, if anything; what life can mean if there is an afterlife or if there isn't; what knowing about your peoples'

²⁵ Fragment of the text opening Jana Ševčíková's film “Jakub”, Czech Republic, 1992.

²⁶ Daniel Ribas, *In search of the Other: the cinema of Jana Ševčíková / Sensory Ethnography Lab Focus* <https://www.portopostdoc.com/home-en/news/view?id=118>

history can mean, if there are people you are willing to call yours; the war time and its lived consequences. There are more themes, emotions, and subjects touched upon, all of them interconnected, interwoven, overlaid. "Jakub", whose first name is also the title of the film, becomes a vehicle through which we can observe how oral history works and get to know the people among whom he lived. Ševčíková shows in a dense one hour long film emotionally, symbolically and just content wise loaded glimpse at a life of a community.

I was very moved during the screening, as for the first time I have encountered a work, where someone looks closely at the world that is so familiar to me from my visits to my mother's family that lives in the village in central Poland. It is a world that is not often present in mass media, in art or anywhere else in the public sphere, yet it continuously exists there filling up a big part of our reality while remaining largely unseen.

The film opens with a sequence of scenes of people trying to recall when was it that Jakub died. The answers vary greatly, from 2 to almost 20 years ago, no one seems to remember it exactly. Some struggle to recall when could it be, some point to who might know it better. One speaker replies that he does not count the years, if someone is dead, they are dead. The way these conversations happen, are very much like among my mother's family members. People argue at times about the facts, who remembers it right, word against word, as there are no other sources at hand to prove it than one's own memory, and at times it is impossible to settle these arguments. On other occasions all who gathered put the information each of them has together, to get to what they are digging for. The filmmaker places all the statements next to each other, not investigating the date of Jakub's death, but rather the world he was living in, the way of being of the people who speak. While we are learning about what has happened, there are observations of what meanings are given to these events, as in this example how time and placement of events in time are being perceived and experienced.

Seeing how different people in the film give very different answers to the question when was it that Jakub has died, there can rise an impression that measurement of time doesn't seem to be of prime importance. How is the time passing then, if not in consecutive numbers marking a progress towards something? In the film I can see people caught in between their daily going abouts. They found themselves where they are because of difficult circumstances like looking for a bit better life on the lands other people vacated due to war and its consequences and because of the need to leave their family land because of unbearable poverty - few of them mention the threat of hunger. Who knows for how long this place is meant for them to stay in?

Borders have changed multiple times in this area in the first half of the twentieth century. What could progress mean in the context of that community? Where are these people coming from? Where are they going? Is it important to ask these questions?

2.2. I have nothing, you have nothing - it can amount to something

Many of the interviewees, as we learn later in the film, are illiterate. One says, he can't read or write, but he can count the money. Few others say that they can sign the papers with their name. Jakub's daughter says: "He drank all the time. I don't know what he was like before we were born. My mother didn't talk about it much. We children thought about other things. I don't know where he lived, how he lived, what he did."²⁷ The history is not necessarily recorded. It's not always being passed on. Those whom it concerns, like in that case, might not get around to ask about it. Those who could pass it on, don't necessarily think that it is important, like if only here and now would matter, and how you can meet the challenges of each coming day. That's the impression one can get in my family too. The weight of past events is laying on us, but their meaning is not properly acknowledged. Perhaps it is not seen as relevant. What kind of relevance does it have for the daily struggles? Can it make things easier, improve them? Getting by best you can seems all that matters. Taking care of meals, cleaning, looking after the close ones, working for it all - if you have a full stomach and a place to sleep, does anything else matter?

There have been so many changes in the last few generations, technological, civilisational, social, political, that it can be hard to compare experiences of the parents to those of the children. Parents' knowledge might seem not useful, and that of grandparents even otherworldly. Perhaps there are some other reasons not to talk about histories much.

It seems that it is the daily struggles and challenges that preoccupy people the most, and that they don't feel they have much agency otherwise than in their immediate surroundings, and their placement in history is such that they are at its mercy.²⁸ One person, in the section where people talk about their literacy and education, says: "I am nothing." I would like to stop

²⁷ Ševčíková, *Jakub*.

²⁸ That is in the stark contrast with people like Andrzej Żuławski or Grzegorz Królikiewicz who in book long interviews pay a lot of attention to places, dates and how life of their family was related to historical events, what stances were taken and what's their position as inheritors. They see themselves as part of culture and history and as subjects with agency to affect it. Both are screenwriters and filmmakers, Żuławski also wrote and published throughout his life, Królikiewicz was teaching generations of students at National Film School in Łódź.

and think what can she mean by that. Because of where this statement appears in the film, perhaps it comes from putting on the lense of people from the dominating culture. Not acquiring anything that would be considered prestigious or important by the group that has the power to make decisions influencing people's lives, one might feel one has no meaning in that perspective. Tomasz Żukowski writing about Polish Nonejewish narratives, as those of a dominating group in Polish Nonejews - Polish Jews relations, refers to Bordieu to analyse mechanisms at work there:

“Pierre Bordieu pointed out the connection between identity narratives and domination. He showed how control over social practices comes together with control over narratives about the community and how identities of the actors on the social scene are rooted in both those spheres. (...) The difference between the dominating majority and the excluded is also in the narrative about the world and the society. It is formulated from dominating positions, it strengthens and justifies their power and privileges.

This division seems to come from natural order and is not seen as a man made product. What Bourdieu is describing as symbolical violence is how the discriminated are interiorizing and embodying the narrative and what follows, the criteria of judgment that lie at the bottom of their discrimination. It happens, because a large part of reality remains outside of the visible sphere - it pertains to both, actions that allow the domination and the experiences of the excluded.” [T.

M.]²⁹

Żukowski describes this in the context of majority dominating a minority, it is useful to remember here, that as it historically has happened with rural communities, industrial workers and in colonialism, so it can apply to minority dominating majority just as well. Whoever is able to secure the domination and control over the lives of other people in a biological sense and over the narratives that help to control those lives.

How it can be realised in the daily reality of those who are subjected to others' domination is that there can function this mechanism of self-deprecation (if not self-humiliation) and glorifying the people in power at the same time. The invisible arbitrary settings of the social relations that can be behind that situation present themselves as “natural order” and might not be seen by both parties, those benefiting from the power structure and those who are at loss

²⁹ Żukowski, wielki retusz, p. ebook

from it. And even though people situated higher benefit from it in some immediate sense when it comes to access to resources, comfort and ease of their lives, both sides are at loss in that equation. Very acute description of how that process can take place is offered by James Baldwin in his essay "The White Man's Guilt":

"(...) in the most private chamber of his heart (...), the black American finds *himself* facing the terrible roster of his lost: The dead, black junkie; the defeated, black father; the unutterably weary, black mother; the unutterably ruined, black girl. And one begins to suspect an awful thing: that people believe that they *deserve* their history, and that when they operate on this belief, they perish. But one knows that they can scarcely avoid believing that they deserve it: one's short time on this earth is very mysterious and very dark and very hard. I have known many black men and women and black boys and girls who really believed that it was better to be white than black, whose lives were ruined or ended by this belief; and I, myself, carried the seeds of this destruction within me for a long time.

Now if I, as a black man, profoundly believe that I deserve my history and deserve to be treated as I am, then I must also, fatally, believe that white people deserve their history and deserve the power and the glory which their testimony and the evidence of my own senses assure me that they have. And if black people fall into this trap, the trap of believing that they deserve their fate, white people fall into the yet more stunning and intricate trap of believing that they deserve *their* fate, and their comparative safety and that black people, therefore, need only do as white people have done to rise to where white people now are. But this simply cannot be said, not only for reasons of politeness or charity, but also because white people carry in them a carefully muffled fear that black people long to do to others what has been done to them."³⁰

Written to describe a particular situation of African Americans, it can serve in my opinion as a framework for analyzing and trying to understand the situation of rural communities in Eastern Europe. The possibilities to change one's situation might be structurally limited, while at the same time one can be told and believe in it, that if one follows what people occupying higher positions in that structure do, one can come to that position. Coming from the peasantry that would mean obliterating your own history and history of your own people, learning to despise it.

³⁰ James Baldwin, *Collected essays*, Literary Classics of the United States, New York, 1998, p. 724.

It would be changing the sides, allying oneself with those who oppress in their egoistic interest, no matter how carefully camouflaged under other pretenses. It would be craving to be on the other side of those who despise, and leaving the ranks of the despised. It would be movement in the existing symbolic field, substituting one group of symbols for another, changing one's own position while leaving the economical system of the symbolic field in place.

Kacper Pobłocki writes in his essay "Szeptana historia Polski" ("Whispered history of Poland" - T. M.)³¹ how folk history is not to be found at schools, it is often at odds with what one learns from books and from teachers, it is what one learns at home, what is spoken about but goes unacknowledged in the public sphere. And it is often done by women, who, as he writes, can tell parts of the story men don't want to admit to, "sometimes with hearty humour, that bursts the balloon of pompous narrations." [T. M.]³² Taking the narratives of the elites as one's own, repeating them and declaring the values that support it does disfavour to both parties - the elites hold on to illusions of their own righteousness while being stuck in their narrative that serves to cover their egoism and exploitation that's done in its name, and those aspiring to become the elites give up who they are. As one of the characteristics of communication among the workers and peasants Pobłocki shows few examples (from Baltimore, U.S.A.; from local bazaar in Warsaw, Poland and more) of use of words like "hun", "honey" and "darling" that pull you into the warmth, cordiality and directness with your interlocutor. Even if we don't know each other, we assume we are somehow in the same position. Something that would have to be dropped for the sake of titles like Mr and Mrs when aspiring to join the ranks of the elites. You don't any longer assume your position is similar, but rather, that it falls somewhere within the hierarchy. You are not equal in your rights, but in a higher or lower position (economically, as to your possibilities, aspirations etc.) or similar at most and you might be engaged in competing for resources, trying to secure what you have, trying to forward your position. Because that structure is based on violence, however hidden or disguised, the mode of engagement is that of a fight, as you need to assert yourself to dominate or be subjected to domination.³³ In this way

³¹ Kacper Pobłocki, "Szeptana historia Polski" (Whispered history of Poland - T. M.), in *Magazyn Pismo*, 2019. <https://magazynpismo.pl/szeptana-historia-polski/>

³² Ibidem. In Svetlana Alexevich's book *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II* husband of one of the women the author is talking with, before her meeting with the journalist explains to his wife about army's strategy and other battle information she should remember in the conversation. When the women meet they talk about human relationships and how actually a daily life on the front looked like, omitting the idealised heroic historical narrative, and focusing on a personal account that includes emotions, acknowledges the suffering and experienced difficulties.

³³ It is a common trope in american pop culture of which some recent examples may include lyrics in Kanye West's song "New Slaves": "You see there's leaders and there's followers But I'd rather be a dick

we can see how the symbolic violence, the narratives and other symbols can translate to small gestures and behaviours in everyday life, like greeting each other. It has very real and palpable consequences. Pobłocki makes a claim that flattening hierarchies, solidarity and empathy among the dispossessed could be an antidote for individualism and egoism of upper classes.

This heartfelt gesture that Pobłocki focuses on can serve as inspiration for a different set of values. From thinking of people as nothing, having nothing, lacking anything we consider of value, being failed versions of ourselves in Wade Davis's words,³⁴ a different framework is more desirable. Having nothing in the sense of nothing desirable from the dominant culture's perspective, instead of lack of something, Pobłocki argues, is a state of being in its own right, carrying different points of references, modes of behaviour and different values. Different in the sense in which it exists outside of the judgment based on another system of values and needs to be considered respectfully as something separate, bringing ways of being outside of our current awareness. The consequence of that could be simply that human dignity is not something granted by anyone, but something no one can take away from us. It is a movement from contempt to acknowledgement that every person has their history behind them, their dignity. This seems to me a necessary assertion for there to be room for negotiation of social deals between different groups of people.

In the conflicts we can observe between what we could call more democratic movements and more authoritarian ones from my observation both sides are guilty of contempt and deprivation of dignity of their political opponents. That there are lessons in history that teach us not to strip another human of their dignity or it opens way for atrocious acts doesn't seem to be enough. It is not the knowledge itself that matters but also what it does to us or what it doesn't do, how we are affected by it or unaffected.³⁵ Dominick LaCapra argues in his book "Writing

than a swallower." Or Netflix produced feature film "Spenser Confidential" where in the final scene lone good hero against the world fights with the most evil villain, and the villain declares in a dialog that runs between the punches: "There is no justice. There is only the strong and the weak." I think it is valid to see these works as emanations of ideas circulating in the collective American psyche, that are radiating to wherever the products of American popular culture are reaching.

³⁴ Wade Davis, lecture based on his book "The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in a Modern World." given in Oregon Humanities Centre in 2013.

³⁵ One aspect of it is the circulation of knowledge. Tomasz Żukowski writes in the introduction to his book *Wielki retusz. Jak zapomnieliśmy, że Polacy mordowali Żydów* [The great retouch. How we forgot that Polish were murdering the Jews - T. M.], about the gap between historical research and collective consciousness. The latest research on the subject, that could be considered the state of the knowledge in a certain area, does not automatically mean the state of knowledge in the society. Voices bringing up Polish participation in killing the Jewish population during World War Two can be subjected to mechanisms of denial, silencing, negation, accusations of treason and more. As Joanna Tokarska-Bakir pointed out in her collection of essays dedicated to Polish Jewish relations *Rzeczy mgliste* [Nebulous

history, writing trauma” for historians and those dealing with history to engage in what he calls “empathic unsettlement”, that can lead for things to settle afterwards in a new way.

“The role of empathy and empathic unsettlement in the attentive secondary witness (...) involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other's position and hence not taking the other's place. Opening oneself to empathic unsettlement is, as I intimated, a desirable affective dimension of inquiry which complements and supplements empirical research and analysis. Empathy is important in attempting to understand traumatic events and victims, and it may (I think, should) have stylistic effects in the way one discusses or addresses certain problems.”³⁶

This kind of understanding that includes affects, can, I would like to argue, lead to better understanding of historical events in the shadow of which we live, or ones we are trying to have a better grasp of. That's how I see the role of works I am discussing in chapter four.

It is about letting yourself be affected by what you encounter and investigate, and trying to acknowledge how that happens the best to your abilities. I think in both what Pabłocki and LaCapra write it can be traced that this engagement with the affects in the context of historical research and personal engagement with memory and history can serve as safeguarding from idealising and sublimation of past events. By that I mean elevating historical elements (events, its designated protagonists, symbols embedded in the narratives and/or built by them) from the realm of human experience to the sphere of transcendence, somewhere where our understanding cannot reach or is very limited. Once there, these elements can be considered untouchable, “holy”, petrified (seemingly immune to change) ideals beyond our grasp. Then they can be used as a source of power in the way religious elements are being used - it is enough to lay claim and ownership over the symbol, and derive from them “holy decrees”, imperatives for action towards goals we are designating for ourselves and others. An example of that in my opinion is the battle over the abortion rights. “Life” as an absolute and holy entity versus socially, politically, ethically placed discussions within the realm of human experience that can be

things - T. M.J., public discussion about Polish participation in the Holocaust erupted with greater force only two times, once after the premiere of Claude Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah* and second time after publication of Jan Tomasz Gross's book *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*. In both cases the subject was taken up on the international arena and therefore could not be contained by usual mechanisms of dealing with it within Poland.

³⁶ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing trauma*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2001, p. 78.

discussed, investigated and problematized. In the historical context Holocaust can serve as an example. Claims are being made as to it defying as an event any possibility of understanding, and attempts at explicating it can be seen as blasphemous, as they can never give justice to this event that is lifted to the sublime sphere. Crucial aspect of LaCapra's research in my opinion is his insistence on going into murky and difficult territories and trying to make distinctions, however complex that process may be. That seems necessary if, as Żukowski writes about Różewicz's oeuvre, one attempts postholocaust critique of one's culture, and tries to build new ethics connecting it to the memory of the victims.³⁷

This is a work that possibly cannot be fully completed at any point in time. In his writing LaCapra seems to constantly warn us against following a sublime, ideal scenario at the end of which we would arrive at "the end of history", to the plateau of enjoying life in the light of human rights. If we are to accept the way LaCapra outlines it we need to repeat and renew this work continuously, addressing particular situations with particular stylistic, formal solutions, looking for a fitting tone for each situation:

"This is something Jurgen Habermas said: there was something that happened in the Holocaust that seemed to change the face of humanity; that something emerged that we didn't conceive of before or that we were not able to expect. On the basis of that assertion, I would tend to conclude that there is an argument to be made for enlightenment, not as an assumption but as something you strive for – that you strive for in a way that understands it in terms of its complexity – as substantive rationality that you cannot simply define in a neat way."³⁸

2.3. "Genocide of the mind"³⁹

Aforementioned woman's statement in Jana Ševčíková's film "Jakub", "I am nothing", carries a very strong emotional load, and I would like to try to look at that closer too. I have three clues as to how to approach it. First one comes from a book by Czesław Miłosz "Wyprawa w dwudziestolecie" ("An Excursion through the Twenties and Thirties"), in which he collected texts

³⁷ Tomasz Żukowski, "Biografia z piętnem. O "Drewnianym karabinie" Tadeusza Różewicza", in *Niepokoje. Twórczość Tadeusza Różewicza wobec Zagłady*. Ed. P. Krupiński. Wydawnictwo ŻIH. Warszawa 2014.

³⁸ LaCapra, p. 177-178.

³⁹ I am borrowing that title from "Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing", collection of essays edited by Marijo Moor.

describing life in Polish state between the First and the Second World Wars. In it there is a review of a recent at the time publication, a collection of peasants' diaries. When it comes to education and access to culture, there is a quote from one of the diaries: "Our fundamental poverty is ignorance. The blind doesn't see the panorama of the natural world - we trudge blindfolded in the spiritual world. We look, and we see nothing. We see, and we understand nothing."⁴⁰ In the film we can also see people existing and functioning in the world but not necessarily finding a place, or a way to be in it that would seem suitable, at ease, a way that one would find beneficial for oneself in the sense of finding a sense of belonging, in many ways that this can happen - through people, connection with the place, way of relating with the world and more.

There are several instances throughout the film, that when put together with saying "I am nothing" and other statements in it could lead to certain interpretation. Film has a poetic quality of which Daniel Ribas says: "This inventive use of sound and image allows a necessary sensoriality of the community, since it is not only by a passive observation that we see it, but also by the ability to summon different elements to a multiplicity of signs of reality. This method raises a poetic apprehension of the real, because it makes all the shots of the film equivalent (...)"⁴¹ It is a very useful analysis, as it points to the quality of the film, which is very much like a quality of the poem, in which all the words used can be seen in relation to one another when it comes to evoking different meanings. Each of them throws a light on each other and in the interconnections the meanings emerge suspended in spaces between words and lines, not settling but remaining open for new interpretations. Having said that, I would like to allow myself here interpreting the film, like one interprets a poem, looking for its meaning in relation to other elements of the film and by browsing through my knowledge and experiences. What emerges in my opinion from the procession of moving images on the screen is the sense of not having good access to one's own feelings and thoughts. Some inability to untangle them, give them name and place in one's life, to integrate them into the narratives we have about ourselves and the world surrounding us. There might be no space for that, as what we feel and think might not be iterated in narratives that are in the circulation. They might remain imprisoned within us, serving as impulses for our behaviour, that can be hard to navigate in this way, and might control us in a compulsive way.

⁴⁰ Czesław Miłosz, *Wyprawa w dwudziestolecie*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1999, p. 346.

⁴¹ Ribas, op. cit.

There are two specific occasions at which it is articulated stronger in my opinion. One is when the camera travels through textile, to reveal that there is an old man lying under the coat. His eyes are open, it is impossible to say if he is aware of the camera or not, he lies there, motionless. And another travelling shot, starting from the hands holding a cigarette. These are hands shaped by heavy labour, in which the cigarette seems like a delicate object clamped by rough and heavy fingers. When the camera shows the wider frame of this man, we see that his eyes are open, but seem absent. Snow falls slowly on him, at times he takes a drag mechanically, in a reflex that doesn't need to be consciously addressed. It makes an uncanny impression of a body deserted by the spirit that keeps on moving. My first assumption is that the man is drunk to the loss of consciousness. Together with other images however, it creates a feeling of one's world ending at the edge of one's body. One is imprisoned, as one knows little else than the inner turmoil in which one cannot name things, cannot identify them, and so, even less, can communicate them. In this way one's agency doesn't reach much further than one's body and its immediate surroundings, and even that, one could argue, is limited, if we don't have knowledge and tools to decipher and/or handle the forces within us, or place ourselves and our actions in understandable ways in the context of our surroundings.

To support that reading I would like to refer to an article Elaine Jahner wrote on Leslie Marmon Silko's novel "Ceremony". Titled "An Act of Attention. Event structure in "Ceremony"" it is describing Tayo's, the novel's protagonist's, entanglement within himself, that he can't connect his experiences to the right parts of mythological narratives to be able to make sense of them in a way that would allow him to address them in a desirable way. This entanglement is perhaps best described when talking about his Aunt:

“(...) the feelings were twisted, tangled roots, and all the names for the source of this growth were buried under English words, out of reach. And there would be no peace and the people would have no rest until the entanglement had been unwound to the source.”⁴²

“To perceive the wrong bonds is to be caught up in the wrong boundaries of experience and to misunderstand the nature of cause and effect.”⁴³ comments Jahner. It is the movement between the mythical story and the particular events of life, to make the right connections between them, but also to constantly renew them, keep them alive. From the fragment above we can read that

⁴² Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*, Penguin Group, New York, 2006, p. 64.

⁴³ Elaine Jahner, “An Act of Attention. Event structure in “Ceremony”, in *Leslie Marmon Silko's “Ceremony”. A Casebook*. Ed. Allan Chavkin, Oxford University Press, 2002, P. 45.

the English language, and concepts that it has brought is what blocks the access to the old mythiical reality that is still alive, and affects that stem from it, but access to it has been lost.

I would like to look at what keeping the connection between mythical and particular alive can mean in another context. An example is offered by Brian Friel in his play "Translations". It's action takes place at the time of colonization of Ireland by the English at the point of it when English military draws the most precise map of the island to that time and English educational system is being imposed. The map will be published in English, and so all the local names are being translated, transcribed phonetically, or renamed in English. One of the two people responsible for this task is Owen who grew up in the village that is currently being mapped. At one point he explains to his supervisor and collaborator the name of the crossroads:

"We've come to this crossroads. Come here and look at it, man! Look at it! And we call that crossroads Tobair Vree. And why do we call it Tobair Vree? I'll tell you why. Tobair means well. But what does Vree mean? It's a corruption of Brian - (*Gaelic pronunciation.*) Brian - an erosion of Tobair Bhriain. Because a hundred-and-fifty years ago there used to be a well there, not at the crossroads, mind you - that would be too simple - but in the field close to the crossroads. And an old man called Brian, whose face was disfigured by an enormous growth, got it into his head that the water in that well was blessed; and every day for seven months he went there and bathed his face in it. But the growth didn't go away; and one morning Brian was found drowned in that well. And ever since that crossroads is known as Tobair Vree - even though that well has long since dried up. But ask Doalty - or Maire - or Bridget - even my father - even Manus - why it's called Tobair Vree; and do you think they'll know? I know they don't know. So the question I put to you, Lieutenant, is this: What do we do with a name like that? Do we scrap Tobair Vree altogether and call it - what? - The Cross? Crossroads? Or do we keep piety with a man long dead, long forgotten, his name 'eroded' beyond recognition, whose trivial little story nobody in the parish remembers?"⁴⁴

His father later remarks:

"A - that it is not the literal past, the 'facts' of history, that shape us, but the images of the past embodied in language.

⁴⁴ Brian Friel, *Translations*, Faber and Faber, London, 1981, p. 43 - 44.

B - we must never cease renewing those images; because once we do, we fossilise.”⁴⁵

Perhaps that is one of the reasons that some of the characters in the play seem passive and/or proactive when it comes to English language taking over. The language may not seem vital for their existence. One can give way to the new, or eagerly take it up hoping for improvement of one's life circumstances. It is a much more complex situation and I don't mean to form a point in which Irish people lost their language out of their own call, cause the English violence and overwhelming physical power and following it symbolic violence also within the play are obvious. This aspect of it is interesting to me however, as an argument for keeping the contact with the past alive to keep renewing it's connection to one's life's events to avoid the danger of falling for the fantasies if not understanding them. Very plain example of that is the couple falling in love. The English Lieutenant Yolland and Maire, young woman living in the village fall for each other while not speaking each other's languages. Each hopes that the other will fulfill their aspirations and fantasies. Maire wants to learn English and leave the village looking to improve her life situation while Yolland feels he found his place on earth in the village and would hope to start a new life here with her. Both think that by getting close to each other they are getting closer to fulfilling their desires. What might appear like a trope from a comedy of errors, is in my opinion making a more subtle point. With no access to language and meanings with which it describes the world there is a danger of misunderstanding one's position, making the wrong connections and so acting in reaction to false points of references that give us different results from the ones we are pursuing.

I would like to propose that same mechanism as a possible factor of Polish youth coming from working class families that came from peasantry taking up national narratives as their own. With moving to the cities and rupture in the way of life that can disassociate a person with previous points of reference one might take up national narratives propagated by school and other state institutions. Those narratives perpetuated through education are part of the culture of the elites, and history told from their point of view serves to secure their privileged position in the society. Youth whose history is different, as they come from peasantry and so from centuries of being oppressed and violated, looks to draw pride and dignity from identification with the history of the elites, the royalty and the aristocracy, and decisions this small group was taking deciding the majority's fate. Among many factors that might be part of making this leap possible I would identify a vacuum one can find oneself in if cut off from memory and history, and also lack of existing alternative histories in circulation. The history of the group of people we come from

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 66.

might simply be not included in narratives to choose from, apart from the stories circulating within a family. These however may exist on the fringes of the public sphere or be invisible in it and not form a real alternative, as it is impossible to easily explain to anyone our position if history of our people is not known or not recognized outside our immediate family circle.

Continuing on the keeping the connection between mythical reality and particular events of life a striking example of a dead ritual was to me the funeral of my grandfather's cousin. The priest did not talk of the deceased person or about any particularities concerning her or of the family to the gathered people, but that there is no salvation outside of the Church and that one can only reach it through Jesus Christ. The ritual he performed seemed to serve cementing the Church's domination that is in Poland close to that of a monopoly in the services like that of funerals. Priest conducting the ceremony seemed primarily preoccupied with wanting to make sure we understand that there is no other form of burial if we wish well to our close ones. Techniques akin to those of commercial corporations. The priest might have not known my grandfather's cousin, and might have just performed it in a routine manner. Yet any other address of this important moment to those who have gathered was minor or absent. It was not the people who were addressed but the interest of the institution that the priest represented. This ritual was not for the people. The language and its concepts were those of the Church for the Church's benefit. It was a dead ritual that left us to ourselves, isolated and alienated from one another, each with their feelings and thoughts alone and unaddressed.

I would like to invoke here the opening lines of Leslie Marmon Silko's book "The Ceremony":

"You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories.

Their evil is mighty
but it can't stand up to our stories.
So they try to destroy the stories
let stories be confused and forgotten.

They would like that
They would be happy
Because we would be defenseless then.

He rubbed his belly.

I keep them here
[he said]
Here, put your hand on it
See, it is moving.
There is life here
for the people."⁴⁶

The Church obliterates the origins of the people and the particularities of their lives. In this way people can be led easier, they have no powerful mythical structures to stand against those of the Church and to actually take care of themselves. Largely what the Church offers these days in Poland is disconnected to any particular realities. It is the mythical reality itself, existing for itself, in its own right, and for those who are handling it, without renewed and alive connection to people's life. The movement between objectifying and universalising narratives of the Church and current, particular events has come almost to stand still. Abstracted like that it can be employed to support and serve many people and ideologies and it is being employed to support right wing parties to secure interests of the Church. Silko writes that the God of white people was already dead when they crossed the Ocean and arrived at the land of native American people. Their religion had no more power to heal its people at that point, it was devouring them (e. g. Inquisition, religious wars). I find this perspective interesting as an impulse to reevaluate the culture I was born into. How does it serve the communities and the environment?

2.4. How to change involuntary mimicry

I would like to dedicate part of the text to looking closer at falling into the trap that Baldwin talks about in the quotation above, the trap of interiorizing the narratives of one's own inferiority. Close analysis of this mechanism is done by John Tagg in the 6th chapter of his book "The burden of representation: essays on photographs and histories". Tagg takes a closer look at two photographs, one showing "middle-class couple from Union Point, Georgia, in 1941" and the other "recipients of government aid from the Farm Security Administration, at home in Hidalgo County, Texas, in 1939." Tagg engages in complex analysis of ideology and representation.

⁴⁶ Silko, p. 2.

“(...) what is common in the two images - the concepts of *family* and *home*. What we experience is a double movement which typifies ideological discourse. On the one hand, the ideological construction put on the objects and events concretises a general mythical scheme by incorporating it in the reality of these specific historical moments. At the same time, however, the very conjuncture of the objects and events and the mythical schema dehistoricized the same objects and events by displacing the ideological connection to the archetypal level of the natural and universal in order to conceal its specifically *ideological nature*.”⁴⁷



Russell Lee, Hidalgo County, Texas, 1939

⁴⁷ John Tagg, “The Currency of the Photograph: New Deal Reformism and Documentary Rhetoric”, in *The burden of representation: essays on photographs and histories*, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 159 - 160.



Jack Delano, Union Point, Georgia, 1941

It can lead us to interesting conclusions when we read this quote next to the quote from Sławomir Sikora based on Kirsten Hustrup's writing about differentiation of memory and history that I have placed towards the end of the first chapter. It is the movement between individual practices and their particularity and their historicity and ideology. In the case of the middle class couple they can be said to be engaged in enacting practices that sustain their status, they can be reproducing existing modes of it, with their particular combination of the chosen elements, having the agency to change it too. They could be said to be subjected to the ideology, following practices that secure their prosperity, that exist also outside of them, while also willingly engaging in them and having possibility to modify them. However as Baldwin pointed out, they can just as well fall into the trap of believing that they deserve their history and not be aware of the powerplay they are engaged in.

When it comes to the Russell Lee's picture:

"If the discrepancies in these two photographed rooms clearly signify that the difference between the two is a difference of class, then it is equally clear that the one has been realised within the dominant form of the other and that this dominant form is an ideological form constituted in the form of life and by the realisation of the values, beliefs and modes of thought of the dominant class."⁴⁸

Both couples have placed tapestries on their walls and Tagg points out that while it is hard to pinpoint what could be the meaning of the images in the tapestries to people who have them in their homes, it is easier to understand that they are a form of social currency. Placed in the field of vision they are to evoke certain associations as to the social status rather than convey meaning through the figures in the image. The latter seems to be lost, yet that fact can be concealed by the social function that it plays that is the main message beyond which it is not necessary to inquire further. Their function is complete if our association goes to the place where it was wished to go when placed there.

"What I am trying to stress here is the absolute continuity of the photographs' ideological existence with their existence as material objects whose 'currency' and 'value' arise in certain distinct and historically specific social practices and are ultimately a function of the state."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 161.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 165.

This mimicry takes the form of collecting tokens: the tapestry, the clock, reading of newspapers. Andrzej Leder, philosopher of culture and psychoanalyst to whom I will refer to more later, points out to the proliferation of sushi bars in Poland as following western models in the way of buying tokens on the world market of identities. No matter if we accept this proposition, being in Warsaw one can easily observe hyper real realisations of models of life proposed by the lifestyle media. This is perhaps because they were imported as readymades and did not emerge in the processes of longer duration and developments taking place within this society as they did in the countries of Western Europe and Northern America that are the main point of reference for aspiring Polish people. From the complaints made by my interlocutors in casual conversations it often seems that unless Warsaw becomes like New York, London and Paris it has failed. I will argue in the third chapter that these social rituals have a function of enchanting reality, and while appearing integral, in the way they are spotless and sealed, are actually disintegrating the self, the social fabric and relationship with our surroundings (natural environment).

“We should remember that, whereas ideology presents itself and imposes on our consciousness as well constructed, coherent and systematic totality which contains our thought within its apparent consistency, it produces this coherence as an effect. As Macherey says, 'ideology is essentially contradictory, riddled with all sorts of conflicts which it attempts to conceal. All kinds of devices are constructed in order to conceal these contradictions; but by concealing them, they somehow reveal them.’”⁵⁰

One could say that both couples are immersed in fantasies about themselves. Confronted with more factual historical circumstances could confront both of them with unrealistic views of themselves, their situation and their place in the society, and make space for a new social arrangement to emerge. How could that shift happen? I would like to consider it in terms of stability and changes that destabilize.

“(…) the internal stability of a society is preserved at one level through the naturalisation of beliefs and practices which are, on the contrary, historically produced and historically specific.”⁵¹

I would like to argue for changes that are process based rather than “revolutionary”. Let me use as an example personal relationships. Being in a relationship both us and our partner(s) can be

⁵⁰ Tagg, p. 161, 'An Interview with Pierre Macherey', (ed. and trans.) Colin Mercer and Jean Radford, Red Letters, Summer 1977, p. 5.

⁵¹ Tagg, p. 165.

changing and these changes can develop differently. One can change continuously but unnoticeably and then a single event can reveal the scope of changes and affect the established ways of being in that relationship. That can cause a shift that can temporarily threaten the security of the relationship. When one person wants to change the established ways and the other resists it, it can mean a time of struggle. And then our relationships with friends and at work can also be changing over time. When it is very sudden and happens in many spheres of life at once they can cause a collapse, a breakdown. Taking care of stability of systems I am sympathetic to gradual changes. Using personal relationships trying to make a point is not only for the sake of convenience but also because my interest in observing the power goes as far as it's results can be applied in the everyday.

“To make an analysis at this level is exactly to observe what Foucault calls the 'capillary form' of the existence of power: 'at the point where power returns into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies, and comes to insert itself into their gestures and attitudes, their discourses, apprenticeships and daily lives'.”⁵²

Changing and shifting power relations in the different relationships in our lives, at work, at home, in social and public interactions, can take time and work. One might need to choose battles, preserve one's energy and take care of one's well being all the while. It can be a lifelong struggle in which we'll gain only a little bit of ground, which still might be well worth our while.

I'd like to bring an example of what Tagg was analysing I have observed while cycling through the Podlasie region in eastern Poland last summer. I stopped at the house of an elderly lady in one of the villages I was passing through. She was cross stitching a lot, taking the patterns from cross stitching magazines. Many of them were images of medieval battles of Polish rulers. When trying to establish the connection of these images to our presence there I could think of a sense of pride and belonging they could produce. It is perhaps stitching the connection between oneself and the Polish state as something mythical and universal carried across the centuries to this day, which lives in us, which we carry and of which we are exponents of. That of course can give us currency directly in our community, these images can be promoting us as good citizens, good members of our Christian parish, valuable human beings. This encounter did not happen in the context of ethnographic research. Its validity as an event that can serve as basis for further reflection is based on the fact that the lady, our host for the night, had at least family and friends visiting her, so these images were there for the display

⁵² Ibidem, p. 165.

for the others, apart from their aesthetics they are a code, a communicate that functions within a group of people and is somehow readable by that group. The magazine is being edited and published, it has a group of recipients. It is clearly placed within a network of people, material production and circulation of ideas.

I would like to imagine that the ties between us and those images of battles are being broken, and instead of connections with the mythical and universal entity of "Poland" we are building a connection with our historical past that is placed in time and space, is part of transformative processes.

2.5. Dreaming the past and seeing it

In order to address the relationship between the mythical and ourselves and to better understand what work needs to be done to fill it with content that has closer relationship to reality rather than to fantasies I would like to visit a chapter from Andrzej Leder's book "Prześlona rewolucja. Ćwiczenie z logiki historycznej" (Overlooked revolution. Exercise in historical logic - T. M.). I would like to start with a scene that Leder starts his chapter dedicated to peasantry describing status quo in the 30s of the 20th century that as the author argues is also accurate in describing social relations presently, as even though society has been dramatically transformed this transformation didn't happen in the symbolical sphere. Sphere that serves as a point of reference in building social relations.

"Someone with a higher rank than passengers who were already present, i.e. Polish Army Ensign, has booked a seat and promised to wait on the street. He's not there. The owner of the bus doesn't dare to leave from Dominikanska street and sends the conductor to look for him. He is not there. We are waiting in front of the post office. He is not there. We are waiting on Orzeszkowa's street and the chauffeur suggests inquiring at the confectionery. Twenty minutes have passed. At last from afar a silhouette appears, approaching in a formal, steady step. Nobody waves their hand, nobody shouts: "Hurry up, god damn it!" Only the conductor runs over to him, to help him carry the suitcase. Dead silence fills up the bus. Not one joke or whispered comment happened. There is something

disheartening about this silence, something of terrible resignation, something of great misery.” [T. M.]⁵³

This master and servant relationship survived and is reenacted today in the working relations in Polish companies. As Leder writes:

“The sense, that we are not dealing with sides of agreement conducting equivalent exchange of work for money, but rather with “overlords” in a plantation and subjected to them laborers, that for unknown reasons need to be paid - and in addition - showed respect, is a very common experience of people working under conditions of Polish capitalism. [T. M.]”⁵⁴

The unacknowledged revolution that should have changed these relations according to Leder happened during World War Two and after it. The elites that remained in power and privileged position even after Poland lost its independence for more than 120 years in the end of 18th century, were humiliated, removed from power and their wealth confiscated by the Germany of the Third Reich and the Soviet Union. After the war the society was radically reorganized. Peasantry and workers received access to education, health care and public offices. They could advance their positions in the society while descending from aristocracy and/or prewar intelligentsia could be a serious disadvantage. In the historical narratives however the continuity of nationhood was preserved. And so today, as Leder puts it, many of us are immersed in the dreams of manors and plantations and their culture and ourselves being part of that culture and inheritors to it. Perhaps this is somewhat similar to the phenomenon in which people talking of their previous incarnations in the films and relating them in conversations in their earlier lives tend to be from royalty or other privileged positions. I have not yet encountered a testimony of being in previous life a starving, sick and violated peasant. And yet historically that is who most of us in Poland come from. Leder argues that only through acknowledging that we can assume our position as subjects that consciously assume their responsibility in current society. Dreaming up our own past as that of glorious, patriotic aristocrats we are prone to reenact the role of privileged master's that in fact were largely preoccupied with securing their own and their families interest then that of a state, not mentioning any concern for the society. Jan Sowa makes a lengthy and well supported argument in his aforementioned book “The King's Phantom

⁵³ Andrzej Leder, *Prześlona rewolucja. Ćwiczenie z logiki historycznej*. [Overlooked revolution. Exercise in historical logic - T. M.], Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa, 2013. Quote from Józef Mackiewicz, *Bunt rojstów* in Czesław Miłosz, *Wyprawa w dwudziestolecie*.

⁵⁴ Ibidem.

Body. A Peripheral Struggle with Modern Form.” to show that the forces that eventually led in the nineteenth century for the Polish state to fall were embedded in particularism of interests of this narrow as to their number group of people. I am not writing that with regret as to the fall of Poland as a national entity, but rather with concern about the well being of people living in the area. What followed in the 19th century were attempts by the empires who territorially annexed Polish state to eradicate the language and the culture of the people living there. Also these reflections here are driven by similar concerns about the society that today lives within the nation state but in the future might transform into another form: how to live with each other and the so-called natural world in a way in which the ecological and political consequences can be more beneficial for the sides involved than it is currently happening.

2.6. “Pure pragmatism” as a possible response to lack of agency and uprootedness

Perhaps the mechanism of internalising narrative that justifies domination of one group over another could be also described as resigning oneself to one’s fate. Villagers of Sevcikova’s film seem to be permeated with a sense of fatalism. We see how different people made different choices during the war. Jakub Popovič of the title, as many who knew him say, killed more people than he could remember. Another man says he shot not to kill. He says he didn’t take any life. Yet rewarded were those who killed, he got nothing out of it, and got disciplined for his behaviour. He voices that as a sense of injustice. Yet the war just came to them, or as it can be described in case of many rural communities, it rolled over them. What is to consider here is a matter of choice. Being used to hearing the accounts from war times of the upper classes one can think of choices people made, like the question to immigrate or not to as individual choices motivated by security reasons, patriotism, care for the close one’s and others. Yet this choice was not everyone’s to make. Here is how Kazimierz Wyka described the situation of Polish elites fleeing abroad in 1939 when first Germany and than Soviet Union invaded Poland:

“Mass escape of government officials, civil and army personnel alike, from generals to sergeants, from ministers to mayors (...) compromised all of the bureaucrats in the eyes of the society. It couldn’t escape in its number of over 20 millions and it didn’t have where to go, that’s why it has judged this event as an escape of rats from a sinking ship that they have themselves steered to the rocks.

(...)

In limousins hurrying to Romania there was no shortage of people once courageous. They were escaping, because their futile effort to plant the theory of the elite, as the only group having a calling to rule, succeeded when it came to their own beliefs. They were convinced that carrying their heads abroad, they are taking with them the most valuable instrument of future governance over the country, that should be for the benefit of that country saved at all cost.” [T. M.]⁵⁵

That description is another argument for the dominating class falling into belief of their own superiority. Tagg in his text warns us against believing in ideology as something existing somewhere even while it is not being performed and represented:

“(...) ideologies do not merely *represent* class interests or forces properly located at the economic level. Such 'interests' or 'forces' are constituted at the level of representation (politics and ideology) by definite means of representation and have no prior existence. In consequence representations are not reducible to class identities pre-given at the economic level. Properly understood, the concept or representation entails a rejection both of reductionist readings and of the idea that class interests or forces exist fully formed but somehow unrealised prior to their representation.”⁵⁶

It is then something that is in the happening, in the making, in motion, not in stable existence somewhere outside its manifestations. It is in the action and in the imaginations. The escape of the elites from Poland could be seen less as a manifestation of the consistent preexisting ideology rather than an act that reveals a way of thinking and its strength, as it is followed to the degree in which it publicly enacts feelings of superiority at a time of common extreme danger. I think that this is helpful in rejecting say capitalism as ideology that is being schemed somewhere and then implemented according to the plan, so rejecting “conspiracy theory” tendencies in criticising capitalism and seeing it rather as *modus operandi* that can be engaged in by particular people in particular situations. This can help in making a distinction between chasing capitalism the way socialism was chased by the U. S. during the cold war, as some kind of bug, disease of the mind, and focusing on observing particular situations and what actual interests and factors are at play in them. For example when tropical forests are being cut in

⁵⁵ Pobłocki, op. cit.

⁵⁶ Tagg, p. 167.

Borneo destroying the habitat of Penan people, the forestry workers rather than agents of capitalism could be seen in the net of relations in which they live in. Same with Japanese ships that pick up the timber, furniture industry that uses it and clients that buy what they produce. There can be complex forces in which one is caught in these situations.

In the case of men in Ševčíková's film I would like to focus on the feeling of lack of agency and being at mercy of fate. They were recruited to the German army, some to the Soviet one and close people fought against each other. There is no talk of political allegiance, or national identity. These Ruthenian people might not have aligned themselves with either of the major forces. If wanting to preserve one's language and culture that are not part of nationalistic and other political narratives of major forces involved in the conflict their interest might have been simply different.

Perhaps another insight into that can offer a conversation I had with the cousin of my grandfather. I have met her late in her life and only had occasion to talk to her a few times, and as I have been already investigating the topic of my interest during one of our meetings I have asked her about the past. When talking about the war time she told me how during Soviet occupation of the lands that before the Second World War were part of Polish state and after the war became Byelarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (and are in Belarussian state today) there was a census conducted in which one had to claim their nationality. She said she was tipped off by her supervisor at the office where she worked as a young woman, that whatever she and her family will state there might be of great significance later. When the war was coming to its end and The Soviet Union annexed these lands, part of the population moved to Polish state in its postwar borders and part stayed. How this was happening in my relative's words is as follows: even though she and her closest family claimed in the census Polish nationality, things weren't decided yet. She had to visit an office in which commissars sat, and who did not accept papers from all the people and in what looked like arbitrary manner simply threw papers of some them to trash, and some people left crying not being able to decide their own fate. She told me how by choosing the right moment and right commissar (someone who based on some details seemed more likely to follow her cause) she was able to get her way. She also said how my grandfather and his closest relatives chose Belarussian nationality in the census, and later had to do some machinations to be able to leave for Poland. The impression I carried away from this conversation was that the matter of nationality was not the patriotic pride and honour we are fed at history lessons at school, but a practical matter, matter of sorting things out in a way that can be beneficial for you in improving your living conditions. Oftentimes

it is said that peasants did not acquire Polish national identity until late in the nineteenth century or in the first half of the twentieth century. Polish were the master's, their language, their culture, their history with its state politics in which they more or less actively participated. Peasant's were at their master's mercy, they were not part of the nation as they could not participate in any way in any political decisions.

2.7. Losing a home that was and losing home that wasn't

For the last part of this chapter I would like to touch on distinctions made by LaCapra in a gentle and nuanced way characteristic of his way of intimating (word he often uses) problems. I think they apply if not to all then to most of the considerations in this chapter that otherwise might seem like separate threads.

"When absence is converted into loss, one increases the likelihood of misplaced nostalgia or utopian politics in quest for a new totality or fully unified community. When loss is converted into (or encrypted in an indiscriminately generalized rhetoric of) absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted.

To blur the distinction between, or to conflate, absence and loss may itself bear striking witness to the impact of trauma and the posttraumatic, which create a state of disorientation, agitation, or even confusion and may induce a gripping response whose power and force of attraction can be compelling."⁵⁷

Converting absence into loss happens a lot in the context of national narratives. An ideal situation of the nation, some pure and harmonious state has been lost and needs to be regained we are often told. It is important to break those narratives by close reading of history clearly showing that such an ideal never was. Craving for such total unification with the ideal, that can be in a sense the promise of all worries, tensions and contradictions coming to an end, a very tempting proposition, can turn quickly into violent elimination of everything that seems to stand in the way between us and the ideal. Being at one with it means the end of our troubles at last, so the more it can seem that it is worth putting every effort in realising this goal.

⁵⁷ LaCapra, p. 46.

The movement to the other direction, treating loss as if it is an absence I would apply to some of the members of the community depicted in the film “Jakub” and to members of my own family. It can be the feeling that home never was and never will be, that there is no origin, and that any consideration given to that is useless, as home and belonging are an impossible dream. It can be the existence of the dust in the wind, that falls where it is thrown, and gives little to no resistance when the next sweeping blow comes. As LaCapra writes, it is possible to work through a loss, but first it needs to be identified as one. It needs to be acknowledged that we have lost something of value so that the process of mourning can begin.

It is further complicated by the intimation that the blur between the two can be a sign of trauma. It can be a difficult territory to navigate, but it seems well worth going there and working on making the distinctions, if the result could be letting go of fantasies that promise paradise but give us hell, or acknowledging the losses that could mean working more consciously with forces within us that this loss has produced, it could mean regaining the agency.

3. Pride and prejudice + humility and penance = sober mindedness and more factual outlook?

3.1. What we think of others is also part of ourselves / Will Queen Elisabeth II kneel down and apologize for British colonialism?

Czesław Miłosz, who dedicated his life to writing poetry and prose, translating, teaching, and other activities around literature immigrated in the beginning of the fifties to what Polish people would commonly refer to as “west”, living and working in the United States and on the western side of what is called iron curtain. He then realised that knowledge about Eastern Europe, its culture, history or anything else is very limited and often false. He felt that he is not understood in the “West”, as almost no one can picture what can it mean to come from there, how his experience and outlook on things is different and why. In reaction to that he wrote a collection of autobiographical essays that were meant for the “western” reader, to try to give a sense of what can that entail. It is very interesting to read also for a person coming from the region, as within it we tell ourselves all the different things about ourselves as a group and as individuals and to try to explain it to someone who does not know the region is a different thing. It requires to formulate things in a way that can be understood for someone not familiar with the common for locals points of reference. In this way one needs to attempt to step out of one's environment and try to look at things familiar and imagine what they might appear like to a stranger. This brings a problem of course what language and what concepts one uses to do that. That is relatively easy perhaps in this case, as Miłosz was well versed in widely acknowledged “western” literature and concepts, and these were his major points of reference. This is a consequence of geographical closeness to those places but more importantly perceiving them as cultural centers and trying to position oneself in relation to them.

It is fitting then, that the chapter dedicated to Russia is followed by a series of quotations from French writer Astolphe de Coustine's “Letters from Russia”. Miłosz explains that his French and American colleagues often thought that he, as a Pole is prejudiced against Russia on one

hand, while having “almost exaggerated sympathy towards Russians taken individually.”⁵⁸ Adding in the notes to the chapter on Russia some of Coustine's observations, he seems to want to show that the same observations “as we have in Poland” were also made by a French visitor to Russia, and that they had their weight. One of them is particularly important for my reflections here:

“I’ve spent the night pondering on the great problem of relative virtues and flaws. I came to the conclusion that a certain important point of political morality wasn’t clarified enough in our times: what part of merit and responsibility is due to the individual in their actions, and what part is due to the society, in which the individual was born. If the society draws glory from great deeds committed by several of its sons, it should also show solidarity with crimes committed by several others.” [T. M.]⁵⁹

De Coustine wrote it in 1843. This problem is particularly important in my opinion when reflecting on where one is coming from. It seems that no individual can be taken to task for the history of their people. Yet it seems a common trope to be found in media, public communications, works of art and personal interactions to encounter pride at the deeds of the people one chooses to call one’s own. Say a line like: “I’m from a country of Balzac”. Or “Nokia is a Finnish company.” Or “Chopin was Polish at heart”. There are several things to consider here. One is that each of those phenomena in this context is considered an achievement, something to look up to, to be envious of, something that had influence on the shape of life the way we are living it - it is invested with certain value in a certain value system. Secondly there is a certain *pars pro toto* logic applied here. The phenomenon in question stands by extension for the qualities of people who can identify with it. This identification can happen through national narratives that bind us with people across the centuries, across class divides and other possible differences. Though this is a very wide problem I would like to focus here particularly on several of its aspects: how this problem is addressed in the politics, in the public sphere and how it emerges in the education system.

Balzac is claimed by the same people, who, if applying this logic, committed atrocities in Algeria. Nokia was founded in the same country that did not settle in a satisfactory way its

⁵⁸ Czesław Miłosz, *Native realm. A search for self definition*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1968, p. 146. Please note, I am using for reference both English language and Polish language editions and I refer to them accordingly, as the text differs at times.

⁵⁹ Czesław Miłosz, *Rodzinna Europa*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 2001, p. 169. Quotations from de Coustine are missing in English language edition I am using for reference otherwise.

relations with Sami people until this day. Chopin was a son of the same people who were participating in the Holocaust as perpetrators towards their Jewish Polish neighbours. These deeds, if not simply eluded and silenced, are often being justified or disowned. These were committed by someone else. There also seems to be an expiry date on shameful acts (if anyone admits to them at all), while the prideful acts nourish us no matter how much time has passed.

Minna Henrikson and Nora Sternfeld did a seminar at Aalto University in 2016 called “Exploring historical and theoretical roots.” Among other things we were looking at competing historical narratives and how they function in the public sphere. Part of it were film screenings, among them “Jenseits des Krieges”⁶⁰ (East of War) by Ruth Beckermann. It is an almost two hour long documentary film shot at the exhibition “VERNICHTUNGSKRIEG – Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944” (War of Annihilation. Crimes of the German Wehrmacht 1941 - 1944) from October 18, until November 22, 1995 in Vienna.⁶¹ It consists of conversations and observations made directly in the exhibition space. There is a scene in it that I find important in opening further the problem under investigation here. It is filmed response of a woman whose family members participated in the war as soldiers in the German army:

“My father died at home in 1943. They’re all made out to be murderers nowadays. I can’t believe that. I can’t believe that, and I know from people’s accounts that they always said: We were shot at, so naturally we defended ourselves, we had to defend ourselves, and I believe that. I don’t believe in these arbitrary hangings and shootings, I don’t believe it. I don’t believe my uncles were murderers. I don’t believe my grandfather’s a murderer. I can’t believe that, otherwise I’d have to hang myself. This is trying to make us believe that our uncles and fathers are murderers. They are making out it was murder and not... Agreed, it was a war of aggression. But it wasn’t like how it’s being shown here. Definitely not.”

This reaction comes in the film immediately after an eyewitness describes the atrocities committed on the Eastern front and affirms the exhibition as being truthful.

There is a problem of collective guilt here and the necessary distinction between those who committed the crimes and those that didn’t. Moreover there needs to be mentioned the

⁶⁰ Available to watch on Youtube:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YxPwz_emDmM&list=PLIojuiLb5AIIOiKuLDrNbajbYjmcVqLVw&index=1 and on Doc Alliance online platform: <https://dafilms.com/film/10579-east-of-war>

⁶¹ Ruth Beckermann, “Shooting journal”, 1995 <https://www.ruthbeckermann.com/home.php?il=53>

complexity of the situation in which Silesians, Ruthenians and other ethnic groups were forcibly drafted to the German army. This reaction however seems to be about the moral responsibility of the individuals who were not directly involved but are family members and in some complex ways inheritors of the perpetrators. The image arising from the exhibition seems to be that of being part of something horrible. The exhibition shows part of the history, part with which associating oneself causes resistance. How to own such a thing? Reaching into the worst horrors becomes an element of a picture that even if you did not participate directly in those events, if you were somehow part of it then, in the way we are constructing our identity, part of the guilt seems to rub off on to you. We might want to be in the same picture with Schubert, but not with the war crimes. "I can't believe that, otherwise I'd have to hang myself." the lady says. The narratives which we tell ourselves about ourselves and our people, the image that we build of ourselves and our close ones, serves in part for ourselves to see our role and position in the world around us, it can help to integrate elements in it as part of our narrative so we can act in it in the way we understand or assume to understand what is it that we are doing. When we think we are good citizens, and so are our relatives, accepting that they have been murderers radically destroys that image and our understanding of the world we live in. Sudden collapse of that structure that seemed stable can possibly lead to disintegration of our identity and therefore some inability to take action as we might not understand anymore what is our position in the world around us. I could imagine in that situation a feeling of not being part of society any more, impossibility of seeing or finding a place within it and therefore impossibility of further existence in it. How can this be addressed?

For one of the ways worth looking at I would like to reach to British history. More than 10 years ago I lived in Britain for more than a year and it was interesting for me to observe in conversations I had there that the pride of British Empire seems to be very much alive. To my mind it was something that wasn't even there anymore, yet its glory seemed still to shine.

Few years later, in 2015 Shashi Tharoor, Member of Indian Parliament at the time, gave a speech at the Oxford Union on the racist, thieving and murderous character of British imperialism.⁶² He was insisting on the need for reparations, putting the stress on the importance of them happening in a symbolic sphere, as something that could go a long way rather than financial reparations. He gives as an example Germany's Federal Chancellor's Willy Brandt

⁶² Shashi Tharoor, Britain Does Owe Reparations - speech at the Oxford Union Society that went viral at the time of it's release online

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7CW7S0zxv4&t=8s>

gesture of kneeling at the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising monument in the 1970. Brandt himself resisted Nazi regime, escaped it to Norway and his German citizenship was revoked. As a statesman he made this gesture, widely read as a gesture of humility and penance, for the sake of Germany and its people. "I think my real success was in having contributed to the fact that in the world in which we live the name of our country, Germany, and the concept of peace can again be mentioned in the same breath." - he said in a TV interview in 1988.⁶³ Following publishing of his book "Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India" that Tharoor wrote in response to popularity of his Oxford Union speech, Shashi Tharoor said on ABC (American Broadcasting Company) News that lack of acknowledgement of Britain's colonial past shown by the fact that "you can actually do A levels in history in the U.K. and not learn a line of colonial history"⁶⁴ is not serving Britain itself. Interestingly I think, Tharoor, just like James Baldwin in his writings, suggests that this is really important for the well being of perpetrators or their inheritors. In this way the weight of the apology as an event is framed as a common cause, something that has weight and importance for all involved.

What Tharoor suggested at the end of his Oxford Union speech is that the reparations that would make him happy could be Britain paying one pound a year to India for the next 200 years, the length of British rule in India. This could be a symbolic gesture of humility and penance. Perhaps it could do something to both, British and Indian psyche. Also in the interviews Tharoor insists that it would be a moral thing to do for Britain to apologize, that it is the moral debt, and that is what he is primarily concerned with and sees as something that should be atoned for. He wants the Indian youth to remember what has been done to India realistically, and thinks that one can forgive, but should not forget. This is an argument in my opinion for seeing one's own and each other's positions in more realistic terms. To use James Baldwin words, so that the oppressed do not fall into the trap of believing that they deserve their history, and so the oppressors do not sustain their false belief that they deserve theirs.

There are the arguments that what does it matter after such a long time, or how can one apply collective guilt. To the first one Tharoor replies by saying that you can still count the number of people who lived under colonialism in millions and a much greater number is of those who are affected by traumas caused by it as their family members. It is only a reason to do it sooner than later. When it comes to the second argument, would it be possible to resign from

⁶³ Willy Brandt biography webpage <https://www.willy-brandt-biography.com/>

⁶⁴ Dr. Shashi Tharoor Demands Britain Apologise For Colonial Exploitation @ ABC News <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkDxMBhphbc&t=14s>

both, the glorious past and its inglorious part? Perhaps disassociating oneself from larger national narratives is possible in the long run, but it does not seem feasible right now. And perhaps through acknowledging the wrong doings one could also gradually dismantle the national myths that are burdening international relations, nations, as well as personal encounters. As I was trying to show in the previous chapter, narratives of domination trickle down to most intimate human relations. Meeting another person one can enact or be confronted with superiority performed in body gestures, the way one carries oneself, the language used, the attention given and many other details. That can be skillfully concealed but cannot be eluded or avoided, cause one makes certain choices when relating to the world around them. When it comes to enacting superiority, it is important in my opinion to what James Baldwin urges us to do, that is to ask oneself what is happening inside of us that we want to put someone else lower and ourselves higher. Baldwin says: "I am not your Negro."⁶⁵ I am not who you make me be. The great value of this insight I see in that the word "Negor" in that statement could be substituted for other words, for whatever someone else is making us to be, imposing on us the image they have made, sometimes forcing us to accept it, sometimes unfortunately successfully.

Noam Chomsky, while speaking at United Nations General Assembly in 2014 about Palestine and Israel, and the U.S.A., Australia and Britain as main states supporting Israel, mentions also how at the time there was an ongoing discussion "in British literary journals like Times Literary Supplement, as to whether Britain should finally begin to recognize (...) the genocidal character of the British colonization."⁶⁶ That is said in the context of how several conflicts are being portrayed and perceived in the United States. What Chomsky calls "textbook examples of invasions": US military action in Afghanistan, Iraq and Vietnam is at best called by Barack Obama "a strategic blunder". At a considerable distance in time, what I guess we could call the intellectual elite (people having certain positions and access to media) only started debating how to look at British colonization. I think what Chomsky suggests but does not articulate further is that it seems extremely hard for the people to call a crime something that is currently happening, that is done "in their name", and the acknowledgement might or might not happen much later. Again, it can happen in situations in which we are applying to ourselves the *pars pro toto* logic, in which actions of people that we are considering ourselves as part of

⁶⁵ Raoul Peck, 2016, *I am not your Negro*, Switzerland, France, Belgium, USA.

⁶⁶ Noam Chomsky, press conference at the United Nations,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUQ_0MubbcM&t=391s

represent us also and are in some fundamental way part of us. In a way that without that part of our identity we would have to radically rethink our position in the world and what we think about ourselves. An interesting description of these mechanisms is offered by James Baldwin in his essay "Stranger in the Village".⁶⁷ In it he asserts that white supremacy is so strong because it is integral to white people's identity, so they can't change their thinking about black people without changing in a very fundamental way their thinking about themselves. So it is about what we imagine ourselves to be and what we imagine about others and how these "two images" are mutually dependent, so it could be more accurate to speak of a single image, or symbolic field that is both shared and collective as well as defended in our individual trenches.

I understand Chomsky's work as an appeal for more sober judgment of the situation based on facts. What happens that it seems so difficult? Those who have access to the information yet don't draw accurate conclusions based on them might not do it for many reasons, among them out of self preservation, feeling of powerlessness or self interest. Chomsky talks how intellectualists like to think of themselves as "dissident, critical, courageous and standing against power" yet most often are a part of a "herd of the independent minds marching in support of state power." That can simply be because one wants to shake the president's hand, wants access to jobs, media, honours and financial resources. But I think there is another important factor and that is the imagination. What do we like to imagine about ourselves and others. The willingness to upkeep a certain image of ourselves and people we identify with, or with whom we share certain narratives, we are with them "on the same page", can be in my opinion a major motivation behind rejecting research and studies and creating and circulating delusionary narratives. In this way it is not a fight for truth or justice but for a position in the world.

What Willy Brandt did can create an opening for dealing with situations like the one depicted by the woman in Ruth Beckermann's documentary. The problem of guilt enters the public sphere and Brandt's gesture points to possible ways of dealing with it. Accepting the guilt, apologizing the victims, asking for forgiveness and hoping that it could be granted one day. Based on considerations made so far I would like to suggest that the tension of the woman appearing in Beckermann's film that culminates in the statement "I can't believe that, otherwise I'd have to hang myself" could be described as tension between what can be perceived as

⁶⁷ James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village", in *Collected essays*, Literary Classics of the United States, New York, 1998.

existence and nonexistence. Life of a citizen attempting to live a decent life and existence of a person that is part of something that is excluded or needs to be put away from the community. If one accepts that the atrocious events are in some way part of one's life what scenario to choose for oneself to continue? Is there a scenario available? Is one banned from the human community, or ostracized? There has to be a way for the perpetrators to continue on living, to make reparations in the symbolic sphere and through that work to regain their dignity.

It is important for me to underline in the end that I do not mean to equalize perpetrators and victims or to conflate their positions. Distinction that LaCapra makes is helpful in preventing that:

“One of the goals of historiography (including historiography as working through) is an attempt to restore to victims, insofar as possible, the dignity of which they were deprived by their oppressors. This is a very important component of historical understanding: to try symbolically, to compensate for certain things that can never be fully compensated for.”⁶⁸

It is important to acknowledge that in certain situations things cannot simply be made right. One should strive for atonement but should not allow oneself to fall into the illusion that things can be made just fine again, “as if nothing ever happened.”. Perhaps that is what Shashi Tharoor meant when he made the distinction between forgiving and forgetting.

When it comes to apologizing and forgiving Joanna Tokarska - Bakir made several important in my opinion comments in her essay “Uciszenie płaczków” (Silencing the mourners - T. M.).⁶⁹ First is that acceptance of the apology, the forgiveness, cannot be expected, demanded or hastened. Tokarska - Bakir writes it in response to a Polish writer who urged the Jewish survivors of the massacre in Jedwabne committed on Jewish population by their Polish neighbours to forgive the Polish population. That would be something, he proposed, that could really help the mutual relations. The forgiveness, in its humility and penance can be only hoped for.

Using German example Tokarska - Bakir writes how it is also not good to apologize too early. German apologies after the Holocaust came too soon, before victims regained their voice and before perpetrators and their supporters could fully realise the scope of what they have done. While it can seem that simply apologizing can quickly “fix the situation”, after initial ease it

⁶⁸ LaCapra, p. 178.

⁶⁹ Joanna Tokarska - Bakir, “Uciszenie płaczków” (Silencing the mourners - T. M.), in *op. cit.*

might postpone actual mending of broken relations, as guilt and harm were not properly acknowledged and therefore wounds could not heal.

It is also not good to forgive too early. Tokarska - Bakir refers to a passage from Nietzsche, saying that at times one might want to show that one is above what has happened and show their greatness by granting forgiveness immediately. That however can be easily sensed by those asking for forgiveness and it can cause strengthening of animosity.

In Judaism, Tokarska - Bakir explains, there is a rule that is supposed to prevent the hardened heart of the victims from using guilt as power over the perpetrators. The one who asks for forgiveness should three times loudly pronounce what they are guilty of. If they will not be granted forgiveness then, the guilt will be transferred to the victim.

The necessary condition for forgiveness to happen still seems to be that it needs to be asked for first.

3.2. Imagination as a battlefield

To elaborate more on competing narratives I would like to bring an example of my personal trajectory. When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003 there were many protests and voices of criticism and myself I wasn't sympathetic to it either. It is interesting for me to observe some grand narratives at work in my imagination at that time. I was thinking that perhaps removing Saddam Hussein could be a desirable development. He was "clearly an evil character" and his absence might bring relief to the Iraqi people. And America, standing for personal freedom, democracy and freedom of speech could perhaps in some way be an agent of positive change in this situation.

I have changed my way of thinking only after watching Abbas Fahdel's two part documentary film "Homeland: Iraq Year Zero." In it the director films members of his larger family in months preceding the invasion, during it and in its aftermath. The family prepares for what is coming among other things by digging a well, something they are used to doing when military conflict in which Iraq is involved erupts. Brother and sister are arguing with each other about unequal participation in household duties. How typical of the siblings to be doing that :) From subtitles appearing when we are watching this footage we learn that the boy, 12 years old filmmaker's nephew Haidar gets killed during the invasion. We see how this family's life is destroyed by outsiders wrecking havoc where they live and all around their region. I cannot

uphold anymore my imagination of evil Saddam and American army as agents of liberal democracy, “the best political system there is”. The imagination, that was in part American pop culture imagination and in part coming from following U. S. and European news outlets. Saddam sleeping with the devil in the South Park series is a joke that plays into binary Christian good and evil worldview. Who is evil? We could answer almost as a children’s choir, as it’s something “every child knows”: evil are Hitler, Saddam, Bin Laden and so on. And if there is transcendental evil, there is transcendental good. If they are evil, then, I guess, we are good. That can be our imagination, the mythological world of our minds.

During this winter Washington Post published what is being referred to as “The Afghanistan Papers”. Through the Freedom of Information Act journalists obtained documents from which it is possible to conclude that among those involved in the American invasion of Afghanistan it is common knowledge that they are involved in senseless violence that doesn’t serve anyone or any visible and feasible aim.

As Polish forces were supporting the U.S. Army in both invasions on that occasion Polish military officer was invited to a radio show in Tok Fm (polish radio station) to comment on the matter. His attitude among other statements was revealed by him saying: “When my adventure in Afghanistan started...” to which the journalist replied: “How would families of the victims receive such a statement?”. Helpless yet trying to defend himself, the officer, who seemed more used to kind conversations with likeminded people, used to his defense that we should try to understand “the military logic”, that in his view escapes the common people. He seemed immune to understand common people’s logic.

This is of course a great problem, what happens inside of us that we can enslave, kill and torture other people. I would like to focus on the part of it that deals with what kind of narratives we tell ourselves that allow us to explain it to ourselves and keep integrity while perpetrating that. On what captures and holds our imagination and how to do work that counters that.

Piotr Majewski, coauthor of the book “Naród w szkole. Historia i nacjonalizm w polskiej edukacji szkolnej” (Nation at school. History and nationalism in Polish school education - T. M.), in radio conversation in the same radio station calls the history education at school a process of “imposing group identity” to “ensure loyalty to the state in question” by means of “levelling or liquidating class, cultural, regional and ethnic differences”. He sees it as a story that is told by a small group of people, Polish aristocracy and then Polish intelligentsia that was inheritor of that culture.

Through quantitative and qualitative research Majewski and his coresearches found out that most teachers follow the books and instructions they receive from Ministry of Education. Some teachers insist on more patriotic upbringing than that offered in curriculum, and some other group brings alternative and regional histories to the classroom. So one way to counter Warsaw-centric narrative of dominating groups is to listen to the stories told and found regionally, listen to the members of the family who carry and share those spoken, or how Pobłocki called them, whispered histories. They are however related in confinement of personal sphere and might not be seen as having much relevance in the outside world. There is an issue there of what importance that is given them, as the same research showed that largely, about 70% of knowledge obtained in that matter is based on school knowledge rather than online, popular culture or other sources.

The three key spheres mentioned so far would be school education, actions taken in the public sphere and personal outlook manifesting in interactions between people. They are clearly interconnected and related to each other in many ways.

3.3. Possible ways of fighting in the battlefield of imagination

Canadian anthropologist Wade Davis gave a lecture in Oregon Humanities Centre based on his book "The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in a Modern World." in which he spoke of "the central revelation of anthropology" being the idea that "(...) the world to which you were born does not exist in some absolute sense, but is just one model of reality, a consequence of one particular set of adaptive choices that your cultural lineage made" and "(...) there are other ways of being, other ways of thinking, other ways of orienting yourself in social, spiritual, ecological space".⁷⁰

This idea is by no means obvious or self explanatory, as giving something value or devaluing it, supremacy and subjugation, and clashing of differences in basic points of reference, all of that can be very present in everyday lives.

In the same lecture Davis continues:

"(...) there is no evolutionary progression in the affairs of culture, there is no ladder of success that goes from the savage to the barbarian to the civilised of

⁷⁰ Wade Davis, "The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in a Modern World.", lecture in Oregon Humanities Centre. All the quotes in this section come from that lecture unless indicated otherwise in following footnotes. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fk7bqPr5OjA>

stranded London, that old idea that there was this pyramid of success that plopped Victorian England at the apex and the slopes of which went down to the so called primitives of the world has been thoroughly discredited (...)"

"Together the myriad of cultures of the world make up a web of life that surrounds a planet and is as important to the wellbeing of the planet as is the biological web of life that you know so well as the biosphere. And if you can think of this cultural web of life as being ethnosphere. And you can define the ethnosphere as being the sum total of thoughts and dreams, ideas and intuition, myths and possibilities brought into being by the human imagination since the dawn of consciousness. The ethnosphere is humanity's great legacy, it's a symbol of all that we have achieved and the promise of all that we can achieve as a wildly creative and imaginative species. And just as the biosphere is being severely impacted with the loss of habitat and the concomitant loss of plant and animal life, so too is the ethnosphere but if anything of course at the far greater rate. No biologist for example would dare suggest that 50% of all plants and animals are moribund or on the brink of extinction because that simply is not true. And yet that, the most apocalyptic scenario in the realm of biological diversity scarcely approaches what we know to be the most optimistic scenario in the realm of cultural diversity."

Davis continues by talking about the rapid disappearance of languages. He brings up the argument that this can perhaps contribute to better communication, more common points of reference, and that we might get along better thanks to that. And then responds to that argument by asking us to imagine that this common language would be Lakota, Tibetan or Haida. So to imagine that English, Finnish or Polish in my case, or any other of our mother tongues would be the one to be replaced by another language. What would that mean to us? Would we lose some part of ourselves? Some way of expressing ourselves? Would we be muted, by not being able to touch on complex reverberations of meanings of the words we got familiar with for a long period of time?

Let's try to take this thought experiment further. Davis also mentions missionaries arriving in the north western Amazon and telling the people inhabiting this area that all the answers that they have to the questions who am I, where do I come from and where am I going are not true. Let's try to imagine that someone comes and tells that to us, that it is all false, that, in my case, Christian ethics, cultures of ancient Rome and Greece, and all of European history it's all a hoax, and it will be replaced now with very different ideas. I wonder if fear of that happening is

not fueling the European islamophobia. “The carefully muffled fear” that James Baldwin wrote about, about something being done to us, that we have done to someone else. The so present in American pop culture sentiment already mentioned in the previous chapter of there being only two options in life: to dominate or to be dominated. Wade Davis tries to open up this binary to an understanding of there being multitude of ways of answering these three aforementioned questions. It is a difficult task of going against deeply ingrained ideas of having the only true God on one's side and equalling economical, technological and military power with being essentially superior.

Could we imagine that history could be taught differently in schools? Instead of creating glorious myths could teachers be problematizing histories of groups of people, trying to address them in their complexity and in this way rather than building a nation to build civic society?

3.4. Stepping down from cultural supremacy

The documentary “El sendero de la anaconda” (The Path of the Anaconda) depicts bio and ethno spheres of the Columbian part of the Amazon that remained relatively unchanged by the industries due to the long period of civil war. Wade Davis appears in it along with Martin von Hildebrand, anthropologist who was one of the people leading efforts to secure the rights of the indigineous people to their land in these territories and protection of the forest. Davis repeats in it one of his catch phrases to make his point: “Raised to believe that a mountain is a pile of rock ready to be mined, I don’t hesitate to tear it apart. Raised to believe that mountain is a deity to be revered, I do exactly that.” He continues by saying that it is not about who is right or wrong, to establish “beyond doubt” what is the ontological status of the mountain, but these approaches, ways of seeing and ways of being have very different ecological consequences. If we accept what Davis is saying, that culture is ultimately an indication of moral and ethical values by which we live, then what does it say about what is being incorrectly and popularly referred to as “civilized world”? In the aforementioned lecture Davis refers to warriors in Polynesia who address conflicts by the display of power rarely going beyond that. I believe that such claim and what conclusions can be drawn from it should be examined in further detail, however as a rhetorical figure it can serve as a reminder or a proposition of their being more ways of addressing problems known to us that we are willing to accept if we insist on sitting on the top of the aforementioned pyramid of “cultural evolution”.

There is a different perspective on the so-called “western civilisation of the white man” that think they are at the apex of cultural and natural evolutions that shows them as a source of destruction of the biosphere and ethnospheres alike. It is offered in a fierce depiction by Leslie Marmon Silko in her novel “The Ceremony”:

“Long time ago
in the beginning
there was nothing European.
And this world might have gone on like that
except for one thing:
witchery.
This world was already complete
even without white people.
There was everything
Including witchery.

Then it happened.
These witch people got together.
Some came from far far away
across oceans
across mountains.
Some had slanty eyes
others had black skin.
They all got together for a contest
the way people have baseball tournaments nowadays
except this was a contest
in dark things.

So anyway
they all got together
witch people from all directions
witches from all the Pueblos
and all the tribes.
They had Navajo witches there,

some from Hopi, and a few from Zuni.
They were having a witches' conference,
that's what it was
Way up in the lava rock hills
north of Cañoncito
they got together
To fool around in caves with their animal skins.
Fox, badger, bobcat, and wolf
they circled the fire
and on the fourth time
they jumped into that animal's skin.

But this time it wasn't enough
and on of them
Maybe a Sioux or some Eskimos
started showing off.
"That wasn't anything,
Watch this."

The contest started like that.
Then some of them lifted the lids
on their big cooking pots,
calling the rest of them over
to take a look:
dead babies simmering in blood
circles of skull cut away
all the brains sucked out.
Witch medicine
to dry and to grind into powder
for new victims.

Others untied skin bundles of disgusting objects:

dark flints, cinders from burned hogans where the dead lay
Whorls of skin
cut from fingerprints
sliced from the penis end and clitoris tip.

Finally there was only one
who hadn't shown off charms or powers.
The witch stood in the shadows beyond the fire
and no one ever knew where this witch came from
which tribe
or if it was a woman or a man.
But the important thing was
this witch didn't show off any dark thunder charcoals
or red ant-hill beads.
This one just told them to listen:
"What I have is a story."

At first they all laughed
but this witch said
Okay
go ahead
laugh if you want to
but as I tell the story
it will begin to happen.

Set in motion now
set in motion by our witchery
to work for us.

Caves across the ocean
in caves of dark hills
white skin people
like the belly of the fish

covered with hair.

*Then they grow away from the earth
then they grow away from the sun
then they grow away from the plants and animals.*

They see no life

When they look

they see only objects.

*The world is a dead thing for them
the trees and the rivers are not alive
the mountains and stones are not alive.*

The deer and bear are objects

They see no life.

They fear

They fear the world.

They destroy what they fear.

They fear themselves.

*The wind will blow them across the ocean
thousands of them in giant boats
swarming like larva
out of a crushed ant hill.*

They will carry objects

which can shoot death

faster than the eye can see.

They will kill things thy fear

all the animals

the people will starve.

They will poison the water

they will spin the water away

*and there will be drought
the people will starve.*

*They will fear what they find
They will fear the people
They kill what they fear.*

*Entire villages will be wiped out
They will slaughter whole tribes.*

*Corpses for us
Blood for us
Killing killing killing killing.*

*And those they do not kill
will die anyway
at the destruction they see
at the loss
at the loss of the children
the loss will destroy the rest.*

*Stolen rivers and mountains
the stolen land will eat their hearts
and jerk their mouths from the Mother.*

*The people will starve.
They will bring terrible diseases
the people have never known.*

*Entire tribes will die out
Covered with festered sores
shitting blood
vomiting blood.*

*Corpses for our work
Set in motion now*

*Set in motion by our witchery
set in motion
to work for us.*

*They will take this world from ocean to ocean
they will turn on each other
they will destroy each other
Up here
in these hills
they will find the rocks,
rocks with veins of green and yellow and black.
They will lay the final pattern with these rocks
they will lay it across the world
and explode everything.*

*Set in motion now
set in motion
To destroy
To kill
Objects to work for us
objects to act for us
Performing the witchery
for suffering
for torment
for the still-born
the deformed
the sterile
the dead.
Whirling
whirling
whirling
whirling*

set into motion now

Set into motion.

So the other witches said

“Okay you win; you take the prize,

But what you said just now it isn't funny

It doesn't sound so good.

We are doing okay without it

we can get along without that kind of thing.

Take it back.

Call that story back.”

But the witch just shook its head

At the others in their stinking animal skins, fur and feathers.

It's already turned loose.

It's already coming.

It can't be called back.”⁷¹

It seems that in this fragment Silko points to the assumptions about the world of the white people, who “carried by the wind” colonized the world, that have destructive consequences. I would distinguish in it two main threads, objectification of the biosphere and destroying in the ethnosphere everything they fear and/or do not understand.⁷² As to the former it is interesting in my opinion to observe current discussions on the possibility of including plants among the sentient beings based on scientific proof of them communicating, perceiving and reacting to the environment around them. If taking to consideration knowledge of indigenous people this shift in thinking about the world around us could have happened long ago. Taking this logic to the ethnosphere I can't help but wonder, do people attached in their thinking to science need scientific proof to acknowledge equality and dignity of people who appear other than

⁷¹ Silko, p. 122 - 128.

⁷² As to the latter Tharoor makes a following comment in the context of colonization of India: “Swami Vivekananda, the Indian sage, reformer and thinker, saw the British as a caste akin to the Vaisyas, governed by the logic of commerce and purely pecuniary considerations, who understood the price of everything they found in India but the value of nothing.” However I think that reference to the caste system here should be challenged, I find the distinction between price and value here insightful and valuable when thinking of these two constantly being confused in the present day.

themselves? Is there scientific research needed to acknowledge that the Aborigine people of Australia are not part of fauna and flora and therefore akin to them as objects at their disposal as it has been done by the British but are sentient creatures like themselves? Is it not a position of the master if we ask: bring me the proof that you are human or else I'll dismiss the idea? I think that can be applied in other spheres like in feminist struggle - does it need to be proven (scientifically?) to patriarchal males that women are equal to them for them to acknowledge it? Again, I think James Baldwin's work is invaluable in turning this perspective and asking what it is that is happening inside the people who humiliate and subjugate others? Why does one need that? Why does one need these constructs like racial and sexual inferiority and being superior to the natural world? Why to lift oneself up there is a need to bring someone and something else down? Isn't it the logic of there existing only the leaders and the followers and concluding that it is always better to position oneself higher and profit from it?

Would then, the rage in the Silko's "Ceremony" and "Almanac of the dead" against the culture brought from Europe not seem justified? Calling them the destroyers?

Rage is also something very present and directly addressed in the writings of James Baldwin. Rage at injustice at afro american lives being destroyed. It can be used as driving force in addressing those problems as I think it happens in "Discourse on Colonialism" by Aimé Césaire:

"My turn to state an equation: colonization = "thing-ification."

I hear the storm. They talk to me about progress, about "achievements," diseases cured, improved standards of living.

I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out.

They throw facts at my head, statistics, mileages of roads, canals, and railroad tracks.

I am talking about thousands of men sacrificed to the Congo-Ocean². I am talking about those who, as I write this, are digging the harbor of Abidjan by hand. I am talking about millions of men torn from their gods, their land, their habits, their life-from life, from the dance, from wisdom."⁷³

This objectification of people and of the elements in the natural world and associated with it commodification runs as a common thread through writings of Tharoor, Silko and Césaire. And

⁷³ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, Monthly Review Press, New York and London, 1972, p. 6.

while there are attempts to change that through movements like “object oriented ontology” or phenomenons falling under the “post anthropocene” umbrella, I cannot help but wonder why not reach rather to the wisdom that Césaire is finishing the paragraph quoted above with. It seems to me that it is not happening on a larger scale for many reasons, among which I would mention domination, colonisation, supremacy and also what I would call scientific bias. While “object oriented ontology” in my view wants to shift our perspective towards the views that some of the indigenous populations were holding for millennia, it attempts to do that using tools developed in European and Northern American philosophy and science. Striving for precision of language and argumentation and careful not to cross the line of what can be still thought of as “rational thinking” (though not careful enough for some of its critics) it tries to enunciate what has been expressed in other ways by people gaining their knowledge through observation, experience and different ways of bonding with their environment. As I wish to live in the world where there is no scientific proof needed for us to treat a fellow human being as deserving dignified treatment, so I would wish to live in the world where other ways of knowing than our own are taken to be valid. That is not a call for abandoning criticality, but for opening oneself to the possibility that for things to be outside of our own experience and knowledge does not mean that they do not exist, but might only mean that we are unfamiliar with them. It is an important distinction in my opinion for there to be the possibility of dialog between different ways of knowing and between people coming from different places with different histories.

Using Wade Davis’s framework, we might want to think not about who is right and who is wrong and acknowledge the European input in the multiple cultural heritages. But the destruction of the biosphere and ethnosphere, don’t they call for moral atonement? One of the threads in Silko’s novel “Almanac of the dead” is that of anthropologists arriving at the Pueblo’s to investigate people’s way of life. They manage to carry away sacred objects with them. There is a trip described that the elder’s take to the museum where the objects were found. Placed behind the glass and in the context of legally protected ownership they are at this point powerless in their attempt to regain them. To them passage of time does not matter, no matter how many centuries have passed balance is waiting to be restored. All they have to do is to work to restore it. It might not happen now, it might not happen in their lifetime, but work towards it is continuously being done. That is their duty, their obligation towards the ancestors and towards the earth.

Violence does not end with the death of the perpetrators and victims. Their children and the way the world was shaped by this violence continue.

Wouldn't acknowledging the destruction help to step down from white supremacy, supremacy of race and culture, that coming back over and over again shows that perhaps it was only swiped under the carpet of political correctness but it's roots were never properly addressed, as it is justifying our egoistic aims, our comfortable lives. Political correctness helps to continue to profess great values, as Christianity professes, arguably, great values, while performing them in a myriad of questionable ways. It can be immediately said that I generalize too much. But I felt I need to address things on that level too, as in my view the ideas like "ladder of progress" from savages through barbarians to civilization as a sequence that everyone needs to go through, and everyone who is not "civilized" is on lower level, are very well in place amongst many of us. So these overarching grand narratives, whose time is supposedly over yet still they dominate, needs to be addressed. Perhaps rather than looking for a single solution that would solve it in some kind of messianic scenario I would see the way of elders in "Almanac of the dead" as a way to avoid trappings of application of "one solution for all" and emergence of new universal and objective truths becoming new sources of violence. More helpful might be adopting their efforts of the continued struggle over the long period of time to balance the issues between people and between people and the world they live in, doing what you can, where you can and how you can. That seems to be the larger premise of Silko's novel. In the struggle against the dominance of "the destroyers" different characters take different actions. March from South to the North begins in which some believe in the spiritual power behind it, some other allies however obtain guns thinking that military conflict is inevitable and this march needs to be prepared for that. This example is not sufficiently exemplifying it, but the rich in characters and plots narrative of the novel brings other instances of people fighting and resisting where they can, how they can and how they see it fit. It comes to a recognition that rather than one scenario and single solution there can be many different actions taken according to different principles and accumulate as common force in laying the ground for better future for more people.

Three spheres I have tried to map out so far, personal interactions, public actions and education can be addressed by different people in different ways. Those having the charisma, and dynamics for it can take a role in the public sphere. Those who rather choose quiet life can act within their vicinity through everything they do. Those who are willing in sharing knowledge through public institutions can do that work. The approaches and spheres of action can complement each other. So rather than a battlefield in which only one person emerges

victorious it could be seen as a field that is worked on and nourished by different people in a variety of ways and their efforts might be informing or even supporting each other the way plants and systems are to support each other in permaculture.

I'm writing it in part in response to situations encountered in the contemporary art scene here in Uusimaa in Finland and elsewhere. Often I've heard the questions "what should we do?", or interlocutors competing for what is the most ethical stance on the matter. This is reminiscent of a hunt for the holy grail of the single solution that would bring us all salvation. The more quiet voices with their different alternative solutions, their richness, get lost in what seems like a battle for dominance recreating the hierarchisation and owning the single truth that it claims to fight with.

Perhaps helpful here is the comment of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz in introduction to his book "Local knowledges":

"Though those with what they take to be one big idea are still among us, calls for "a general theory" of just about anything social sound increasingly hollow, and claims to have one megalomaniac. Whether this is because it is too soon to hope for unified science or too late to believe in it is, I suppose, debatable. But it has never seemed further away, harder to imagine, or less certainly desirable than it does right now. The Sociology is not About to Begin, as Talcott Parsons once half-facetiously announced. It is scattering into frameworks."⁷⁴

In my idea there are many frameworks in which we can work for the benefit and nourishment of our communities. That is not to exclude conflict and debate, but to change it's field from one where new dominators can emerge to one where many work in different ways nourishing and tending to the field in a variety of ways.

3.5. New/old perspective: how well being of the individual can be tied to the well being of the community

"(...) the fifth world had become entangled with European names: the names of the rivers, the hills, the names of the animals and plants - all of creation suddenly had two names: and Indian name and a white name. Christianity separated the people from themselves; it tried to crash the single clan name,

⁷⁴ Clifford Geertz, *Local knowledge*, Fontana Press, London, 1991, p. 4.

encouraging each person to stand alone, because Jesus Christ would save only the individual soul; Jesus Christ was not like Mother who loved and cared for them as her children, as her family.”⁷⁵

This fragment is reminiscent of Wade Davis talking of missionaries arriving in North Western Amazon and telling the people that their answers to the three basic questions were all wrong all this time and they have brought the true answers. Initially it is described here as another layer: one network of concepts is joined by the other. But then, the English ones start to cover the Indian ones:

“The sensitivity remained: the ability to feel what the others were feeling in the belly and chest; words were not necessary, but the messages that people felt were confused now. When Little Sister started drinking wine and riding in cars with the white men and Mexicans, the people could not define their feeling about her. The Catholic priest shook his finger at the drunkenness and lust, but the people felt something deeper: they were losing her, they were losing part of themselves. The older sister had to act; she had to act for the people, to get this young girl back.”

It becomes impossible to name what is happening, as new language and new concepts cover the old ones. But on another level, the affects, the reflexes of the old ways are still in place and operating. Losing a member of a community is still perceived as a community losing itself, losing what it stands for, its fabric is torn. The older sister needs to mend it, not only for the sake of her younger sister and herself but for everybody. It is a matter of maintaining harmony and wellbeing in their existence. But there is an obstacle, as some changes are deep already:

“It might have been possible if the girl had not been ashamed of herself. Shamed by what they taught her in school about the deplorable ways of the Indian people; holy missionary white people who wanted only good for the Indians, these people urged her to break away from her home. She was excited to see that despite the fact she was an Indian, the white men smiled at her from their cars as she walked from the bus stop in Albuquerque back to the Indian School. She smiled and waved; she looked at her own reflection in the windows of houses she passed; her dress, her lipstick, her hair - it was all done perfectly, the way the home-ec teacher taught them, exactly like the white girls.”

⁷⁵ Silko, p. 62-63, All the following paragraphs are continuation of that text ending on page 64.

Wade Davis talks about a wider phenomenon of young people from indigenous communities going away to educate themselves, and through that education they learn also to be ashamed and to despise the ways of people they came from. They have new points of references now, new priorities and hierarchies of importance.

“But after she had been with them, she could feel the truth in their fists and in their greedy feeble love-making; but it was a truth she had no English words for. She hated the people at home when white people talked about their peculiarities; but she always hated herself more because she still thought about them, because she knew their pain at what she was doing with her life. The feelings of shame, at her own people and at the white people, grew inside her, side by side like monstrous twins that would have to be left in the hills to die. The people wanted her back. Her older sister must bring her back. For the people, it was that simple, and when they failed, the humiliation fell on all of them; what happened to the girl did not happen to her alone, it happened to all of them.”

It seems that Silko describes a situation of suspension between the two worlds, not aligning oneself with neither of them fully, and having one foot in each of them. The way these forces play out in the Little Sister is that there is no belonging for her to neither of these two worlds. She's losing connection with the people she came from and gaining connection with outsiders only to realise that maybe there is nothing to gain in the world she aspired to, so she is at loss there too. Disconnected from both, she seems to be losing herself in the process.

“They focused the anger on the girl and her family, knowing from many years of this conflict that the anger could not be contained by a single person or family, but that it must leak out and soak into the ground under the entire village.

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So Auntie had tried desperately to reconcile the family with the people; the old instinct has always been to gather the feelings and opinions that were

⁷⁶ Powerful description of such anger comes from Maxine Hong Kingston's novel "The Warrior Woman: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts". Her aunt got pregnant while not being married, the community punished her family with destroying their crops and food storage and killing their animals on the night she was giving birth. Following that night aunt drowned herself with the newborn baby in the well. Traditionally food and other offerings would be taken to deceased family members, but not to the grave of the aunt. Her name or anything concerning her should never be mentioned, and you had to actively make sure you won't slip at any point. It was the family's effort to deliberately work on forgetting her. The punishment continued after her death. The author calls it the reverse ancestor worshipping. Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Warrior Woman: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, Vintage Books Edition, New York, 1977, chapter "No Name Woman".

scattered through the village, to gather them like willow twigs and tie them into a single prayer bundle that would bring peace to all of them. But now the feelings were twisted, tangled roots, and all the names for the source of this growth were buried under English words, out of reach. And there would be no peace and the people would have no rest until the entanglement had been unwound to the source.”

That description depicts a moment when the new imagination is replacing the old one. The words, the concepts are different, but the feelings of solidarity and responsibility for each other remained. Well being of the individual is tied to the well being of the community. But the way of grasping and addressing that seems to be confused, and while the loss and suffering it causes grow, there seems to be no good way of addressing them. The priest, the new spiritual guide, does not offer them. He offers condemnation of Little Sister’s actions.

To these people, Silko asserts, there is no individual salvation. The pain of losing a member of the community, shame connected to it, falls on all of its members. Wade Davis in his book “Wayfinders” writes of Penan people for whom, in his words, “wealth is defined as a strength of social relations between people”. Their habitat was endangered by the forest industry exporting tropical wood from Borneo. They are among the last of nomadic people, who could entirely survive from the forest, to feed and medicate themselves based on their knowledge of plants that, according to Wade Davis, is much wider than that of academics working in the field.

“When (...) a number of Penan came to Canada to campaign for the protection of their forests, nothing impressed them more than homelessness. They could not understand how in place as wealthy as Vancouver such a thing could exist. A Canadian or American grows up believing is a regrettable but inevitable feature of life. The Penan live by the adage that a poor man shames us all. Indeed, the greatest transgression in their culture is *sihun*, a concept that essentially means a failure to share.”⁷⁷

We may think that poverty always was, is and will be. By entering discussing it, we enter a complex web of political, social, economical, psychological and still more of different

⁷⁷ Wade Davis, *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World*, House of Anansi Press, Toronto, 2009, p. 175-176.

circumstances. The Penan's remarks can serve as a reminder however, that it might not be "the natural way of things", but a problem in the way we organize ourselves as a society.

4. Craft, “folk art”⁷⁸ and my practice

4.1. Watercolour woodcut printing

I'd like to start with why I am doing woodcut printing. About two years ago I took a “Japanese woodblock printing” course at the Aalto University. It was the last year that Kari Laitinen was teaching it before retiring. Kari co-authored the book “The art and craft of woodblock printmaking” together with Tuula Moilanen and Antti Tanttú. I had an opportunity to learn from all three of the authors and I am happy I got to meet them. I think that the fact that each of them being an artist and teacher in their own way and all of three of them being very open to the students' ideas and very enthusiastic about sharing their knowledge, like if for the love of the craft itself, played an important part in me willing to continue this practice beyond the course. But there was much more to it too.

Following the spirit of the ViCCA programme that I found close to me, where we were encouraged to try to express ideas in forms we haven't practiced before, I tried several things: performance, live act practices, intersection of words and images, making objects and making images. What made me want to come back and stay with the woodcut for some time longer was the very beneficial effect it had on me. I am very fond of all the stages one has to go through to arrive at a printed image. In the Aalto University printmaking workshop it starts with getting pre cut plywood. It's a material that comes from the furniture industry. You need to sand it first to smoothen the surface. To do that you have to learn about sanding paper, the different grains it has. Then you need to find a way of doing it, to follow the structure of the wood for the best result. So you don't get in your hands end product designed for your needs, but you are sourcing material that you need to adjust to what you are after.

Next you carve your image. Sitting there for hours with a set of 7 knives, finding ways to work with the material. Different kinds of wood have different hardness, and because of its structure the direction towards which you push your knife matters too. You are not creating from zero with complete control over the process, but you work with the material, with its characteristics, possibilities and limitations.

⁷⁸ I'm writing this category in inverted commas hoping to suspend the usual connotations while still sending the reader to the area of art done outside the bourgeois context.

Before I started doing it myself, I didn't understand why people would spend say a week on making an image if they could do it within hours by drawing, painting or through digital means. Now I see it differently. I appreciate the specific qualities this process brings along.

Then the printing comes. You need to find a way of combining water, nori (a kind of porridge made of rice starch that binds water and paint), and paint in good proportions to achieve the effect that you are seeking. Another quality of the process that is very important for me is to remain open throughout to what happens. Different effects can appear accidentally and you may find them more interesting than what you were planning to do. Or what occurs may inspire you to follow a different direction than what you had in mind. I would say that it is beneficial to combine purposeful action with keeping yourself constantly open to what happens, to work with the accidental and the limitations coming from the materials.

My teacher of textile weaving at the Folk University in Poland, Mrs Barbara as we address her, who is a lady in her seventies now, told us that when she started weaving she was fighting with the threads for six years trying to make them do exactly what she wanted. Only after that time she started to follow the thread and its properties, and things started to work out better this way. It sounded like a personal journey.

And then there is a paper. It's thickness, what it's made of, the kind of fibre it has. You need to moisten the newspaper, place on it the sheet of paper meant for printing, and cover it with another moistened newspaper. At least three first papers will not bring optimal results, as the wood is opening its pores and absorbing the paint still. So you need quite few papers. All of that takes time. There is a lot of instantaneity around us that can make value very abstract and unstable. What does it mean for me to buy a kilogram of rice for 2 euros in Finland? What does it take to grow it, harvest it, transport it and pack it, stock up the shelves in the shop with it? What would it mean to acquire this rice somewhere else, where the basic earnings are not around 10 euros per hour? The woodcut printing process cannot be rushed, but it's processes just take as much time as they need. It's materiality and labour it requires can serve as a reminder of what can be the cost of making something in the times when labour can be invisible, unimagined. Clothes, foods and other goods arrive, they have a number placed on them that doesn't have a stable relation to the amount of work that went to its making or to the ecological cost of bringing it about. If the first one could be, I believe, measured quite accurately, it is perhaps harder to grasp the ecological impact in its entirety.

The Japanese printmakers would obtain materials for printing and making their tools from plants and animals. If you want to continue your work, you need to use the resources at your

disposal in a way that allows for them to renew themselves. And perhaps, from your work you can earn as much as you need, without the necessity for your income to grow exponentially. Working closely with the materials one can get a better understanding of that. Especially if one would obtain the wood by oneself and make the paper from the scratch as some artists do. The materials seem to appear and disappear arriving at our doorstep or to the shop nearby by order, and placed in a trash can are vanishing from our view forever.

These two aspects, materiality and labour, I see as very important parts of it, in the way it can influence the awareness of the world around us with potentially beneficial political and ecological consequences. I see them as integral to the process and why it supports what I would call well being. What I mean by that could be considered as a personal, individual pursuit, yet I would argue it is impossible to separate it from the social and from the ways of being in the world, like relating to nature. This kind of work process that makes me more balanced, makes me a better person to interact with, and more respectful of natural resources.

What made me want to dedicate more time to woodcut printing is how good it made me feel. The long hours dedicated to the process that is demanding from you to remain present and attentive while allowing you also to remain calm and relaxed. If you try to speed it up it is easy for the knife to slip and cut the part you wanted to leave intact. If you lose attention you might also cut away more than the image called for, or miss a path that opened in the process and could be more interesting. At the same time it is allowing you to continue many activities in the background, for the thoughts and emotions to flow uninterrupted. I guess you could call it meditative. Several people I talked to called it therapeutic. Indeed it helps me to keep my emotions at bay so they are not taking me over. My mind becomes clearer and it is easier for me to see what are the next steps I want to take. Not only in printmaking but in other spheres too. It helps me to prioritize. Stepping away from a day at a printmaking workshop I feel more composed, and that following interactions with people are more balanced, in a sense of not being carried away by emotions or not being caught up in my own thoughts as much. I can listen better. That's what I meant when I wrote that it's not possible to separate personal processes from social and, let's call them for sake of simplicity, ecological.

4.2. Folk University in Wola Sękowa

Thinking already for some time about what it can mean for me to come from certain people and certain place I was looking to learn more about folk culture. It only occurred to me recently that my family from both sides comes from peasantry, and that entails certain ways of engaging with the world. I could observe and try to name some of them once I made this distinction between the culture and history of the elites and culture and history of local farming communities. But largely I felt I don't have a good understanding of that. On one side following the benefits of engaging in crafts and on the other looking to learn more about what is commonly called folk culture in the region where I am from I have enrolled at Folk University in Wola Sękowa.

The ideal of the folk school came from Danish social activist Nikolai F. S. Grundtvik in the mid nineteenth century and was implemented in Poland almost a century later among other people by Ignacy Solarz. It was a kind of self organized education by means and resources of the participants and also run by them. In changed form this spirit also survived to this day. Students pay a monthly fee that supports the teaching, materials and maintenance of the building. The students are responsible for cleanliness of the school during their stay for four days a month, including workshops, common areas and common bedrooms. It is independent from state funding and wants to remain so. At the same time the education obtained there is recognized by the state.

The school I am attending is a continuation of the institution established in 1959 in Wzdów. Because of lack of funds to maintain the palace it was placed in, thanks to help and support of the Bukowsko administrative region it moved to a new location in Wola Sękowa in 2006. Many things have changed over the years. Some of my teachers attended the school themselves about 20 years ago when it was a full time boarding school. Now it is a two year course attended in a yearly cycle of 10 gatherings, for 4 days once a month. Wola Sękowa is a village with a violent history of ethnic conflict, pacifications and deportations around the mid twentieth century. In close vicinity to the building of the school there are fruit trees and memorials in the open field, that, as I was told, used to be next to the buildings that are no longer there. Few hundred meters from the school there is Orthodox cemetery with what is left from the chapel that used to be there. Today there is only Catholic Church in the village. Polish,

Ruthenians and Ukrainians used to live here, many groups having their own local dialects and cultural identity. There are some of them present in the region today, with also many people who arrived here after the armed conflicts and deportations.



View 10-15 minutes walk from Folk University in Wola Sękowa.

It is a remote, as for Poland, region in south eastern corner of Polish state, where there is little to no lights at night and one can see so many stars. It is a couple of hours drive from the nearest highway that is an East and West trade and communication route. Through narrow and curly roads one arrives in a small and spread out village with a small shop with basic supplies. This might sound like an exaggerated account of what could be called a remote place, but on a person like me who spent all their life living in the cities it makes an impression.

Because it is craft based practice, unlike in the courses at Aalto University, there is usually very little introduction, sometimes after a couple of sentences we start to work. Concepts

and ideas are not usually discussed unless in a technical way. There is also no interview to be accepted in the school, and no prior qualifications are required. There is no age limitation, my classmates are in their early twenties and in their sixties.

My first encounter with contemporary folk art practices happened a year earlier in a three day folk singing workshop. Nobody asked anybody about singing skills. I haven't been singing since music classes in primary school if I don't count "happy birthdays". Initially I did not know how to modulate my voice to sing in a higher or a lower key. By the third day I had learned that.

At no point when it comes to folk art there is a question of who can do it, who is qualified. It seems everybody is welcome. The tasks are considered creative. When it comes to crafts you constantly need to make choices as to colours, shapes etc. So there is some threshold, as there are insecurities and judgments attached to the concept of being creative.

Welcoming anybody who is willing is very close to me. Often observing works in the world of contemporary art, it seems to me that work itself, the outcome, the documentation can be very interesting and inspiring, but the process was the part that was the most meaningful and transformative. Therefore it would seem to me beneficial to work towards encouraging people to take up arts, participate in workshops and engage in what is considered creative activities. That is where the most transformative journey in the art lies in my opinion. Michel Gondry, filmmaker, animator and music videos director (known largely through his numerous collaborations with Björk) many times said that he thinks that what he is doing anybody could be doing, but the fact that most people don't seem to know about it allows him to keep his job and position. That approach signaling that the ability and will to create and express oneself in this way is a potentiality every one of us carries I see as a valuable assertion that opens the boundaries of art as a sphere of insecurity as to who can and who cannot engage in making it.

Perhaps that is similar to what Matana Roberts, who's working with music, history and improvisation, describes in her talk at Red Bull Music Academy. When she talks about the graphic score that can include photos of her family members from the 19th century, she explains how there are so many ways one can look at the objects, and that allows the personality and individuality of the performers in her ensemble to come through in ways traditional scores wouldn't.⁷⁹

Huun-Huur-Tu is a group of musicians from Republic of Tuva. During the concert at the KEXP radio they talk about their musical practice. In the conversation they establish that

⁷⁹ Matana Roberts on Improvisation and History, Red Bull Music Academy
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9el6A8H3qnU&t=48s>

scientists observed that musicians from Tuva use in their singing voice chords that for most of us remain dormant throughout the lifetime, and that they can cover with their voices and instruments all of the spectrum of audible sound for humans. DJ Rhythma asks them how they learn their musical practice. Sayan Bapa, the founding member of the group, answers:⁸⁰

“You need to learn all the life I think.. It’s... it’s... you start... usually the start it’s like real main game... how this man start to listen around the... around the world, what it means: the sound from the animals, or you hear around you these birds, you start to do something like that, it’s like a game. The same in this situation. You hear it around how they are singing: grandfather, father, uncles or brothers... You start to make it similar, like all these people, and start to do it from the 4 years or 5 years old, and just for game, not for special... it’s just... Later who want it, who really like music, start to do it for himself, it’s not special music... music education, it’s just very special also words, lyrics, all the time kind of allegory between humans, between life and between nature, and after the lyrics have this kind of essence. Sometimes while we are playing with instruments: flute, whatever, violin, guitar, we are not singing, we are playing, it’s just instruments. And the same this situation. After the beautiful lyrics, words, men start to do this sound it’s like essence, essence of the words, essence of the lyrics, and it’s just flute all the time with me, all the time in my body, in my mind. I don’t need instruments, nothing, I have drone, I have rhythm, I have on top of the drone and melody I have... on top of rhythm and drone I have melody, whatever... it’s.. it’s.. For Tuvan people it’s very important. Like harp you know, small instrument, you play all the time, with you, it’s small, you put it in here, situation is the same, just you don’t have anything, it’s just your voice and special technique (...)”

I find the approach to music Sayan Bapa is talking about important in several ways. Firstly in the way the music is seamlessly integrated with life. Sounds of animals and human made music seem to be part of the same realm. There are trends in contemporary music to use sound recordings, and unconventional ways of sound making in live concerts that at times serve also to spread awareness that all of the sound sphere is music and/or music material. It could be

⁸⁰ Huun-Huur-Tu performing live in the KEXP studio. Recorded August 15, 2017.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2ovoRyv4kw>

seen as rediscovery of that fact. It is very ironic though and makes you wonder where did the music world and our sonic attention go to if it takes bold experimentation to assert this seemingly basic fact.

The joyful playfulness of the musical practice, the fact that people take it anywhere they go with them as they see their voice apparatus as another instrument, that they perform for each other and for the animals all of that makes music seem to be as natural part of everyday life as eating or sleeping. Also the way of learning it described by Bapa seems like a playful and joyful process that you pursue out of your own liking and interest. These qualities are very important for me in the creative process and approaching art practices. To see them as something very integral to human activities, something that anyone who has an interest in that can pursue, and it can be joyful and playful. Artist and friend of mine Paola de Ramos who was born and grew up in the south of Brazil, in the city of Curitiba, remarked that Europeans seem to be afraid of colours and joy in art, they are afraid of not being taken seriously, and that there seems to be conviction that unless you are suffering in the process you are not doing work.

4.3. Intimately close with history

Hanna Krall, who is considered in Poland as one of the most important literary reportagists, wrote a text called "Pola". With it she entered the network of complexities of human relations in Poland during the second World War. The decisions people took and their consequences, or what seems like lack of consequences in some cases. It features Polish Jewish, Polish and German populations. The complexities Krall managed to describe in this 20 page text would take the whole chapter or the whole thesis to lay out when supporting them with historical context, browsing through current research and addressing some of the cultural implications. Here I would like to quote a short fragment of the text that I found particularly striking and important for me in the context of work I am aiming to do.

"They drove Jews in trucks to the edge of the forest. Every policeman came up to them, pointed at one person and went with them deeper into the forest. Aimed at the base of the skull and shot. Came back, pointed to the next person and took them to the forest. Walking together took a few minutes. They could see the faces of the victims, hear them begging, weeping or praying." [T. M.]⁸¹

⁸¹ Hanna Krall, "Pola", in *Fantom bólu. Reportaże wszystkie*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2017, p. 655 - 656.

To the matter of factly description, probably based on the books by American historians⁸² Krall points to a few paragraphs earlier as the source of her knowledge, she adds two sentences asking us to imagine what the reality of that situation could have been like. It is a relatively simple and effective literary device to take us from the description of the events we might have heard many times before in the documentary films, history classes, or read about them somewhere, to the situation between two people. We are prompted to imagine what the position of each of them in these few minutes of the walk have been. This is something that is not usually done in the context of historical documentation. It is the author's intervention. This is the kind of intervention into history I am personally interested in. I'd say that while this approach takes as its base historical research and establishes historical facts it shifts the focus to the experience, asking us to try to imagine what it could have been. It is not about experiencing it vicariously, traumatising the audience or simple tear jerking identification with the victims, but giving faces to the people that are talked about, and filling the facts with affects, that dry objectivising perspective can be omitting. It also does in my opinion what LaCapra argued for, it attempts to restore dignity to the victims insofar as possible, departing from the dehumanising perspective used by the perpetrators and confronting it with humanity and suffering of the victims.

Something similar happens in Matana Roberts song "Libation for Mr. Brown: Bid em in". Creating material for the first installment of what is to be a 12 part album series she came about an existing song that she built upon. "Oscar Brown Jr. is a true American griot - in the West African tradition, a storyteller who carries on the oral traditions of a family or village."⁸³ Roberts takes his song in which he imitates an auctioneer selling slaves and adds her own words to it. It would be well worth for me to quote the lyrics in their entirety here, but landing on "paper" they would lose the musical quality they possess in a performance, that is a very catchy tune of joyful singing describing horrifying reality. In her talk at Red Bull Music Academy Roberts commenting on this piece says she is particularly interested "in this blurred line between joy and the pain and trying to bring them together."⁸⁴ The way the tracks are recorded is Roberts gathering in a studio

⁸² Krall only mentions names of the authors: Christopher Browning and Daniel Goldhagen. In the case of Browning it is clearly the book: "Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland." In case of Goldhagen it might be "Hitler's willing executioners" that was published two years prior to Krall's text.

⁸³ Oscar Brown: 'Bid 'Em In'

<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4226706&t=1587029673607>

⁸⁴ Matana Roberts on Improvisation and History | Red Bull Music Academy
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9el6A8H3qnU&t=48s>

an ensemble of musicians that improvise together to the visual scores she is composing, following structure, conduction and clues she is giving while filling it in with, as I mentioned before, what they bring to it as musicians and as people.

The melody and the energy arising in it during the improvisation made me wanna sing the song while I am going about my day, in some joyful way certainly, yet feeling uneasy about words coming out of my mouth. To give a sense of the lyrics I'll quote the part added by Roberts to Oscar Brown Junior's song where she sings as the woman who is being sold:

“you can rape my mother,
you can bid my daddy,
you can chain my brother,
you can bit up my mother,
you can slap me,
you can brand me,
you can reprimand me,
all you got to do,
you can hang my mister,
you can drown my sister,
you can bit up my grandma,
you can kick down my grandpa
you can beat me
you can slice me
the way you treat me
all you gotta do is bid me in.”

Perhaps the tension between the jouyuss performance and the meaning the lyrics are carrying could be compared to the tension between reality of the auction in the song in which what happens is all well and in the right place for some people and the reality of those subjected to violence and the immense suffering it brings. Tension that, as Roberts comments, in some hidden, complex and camouflaged ways still exists today.

Another example of similar in my opinion approach is a short film by Jean-Gabriel Périot “Even if she had been a criminal...” from 2006. It is made entirely from archival footage that is very skillfully used by Périot for visual storytelling. The only words in the film are those of the title and the “Le Marseillaise”, French national anthem. This just under 10 minutes film first shows in fast forward World War Two - the planes, the bombings, the parades, the national leaders and

more. Finally we see the landing of the allies in Normandy and the ruined cities. Périot first shows the joyful faces, before we see the whole scene. It looks like a festive atmosphere of celebration of war's end. Gradually when we see the same footage, but in a wider frame, we see that the joy is connected to lynchings of women. Their hair is shaven, they are being slapped, pushed around, humiliated and mistreated in many other ways in front of crowds of people. Périot uses the close up again, this time on the faces of maltreated women, that prompts us to face, to focus on what she might have felt. Fundamentally he stands in defence of dignity of the persecuted women. Dignity of every human being, also those suspected of crime, and , as the title suggests, those who have committed the crime.

The description touching also on ritual and theatrical aspects of Holocaust offered by Dominick La Capra in his book "Writing history, writing trauma" could serve as a way to frame what we can see on the screen when watching Périot's short film:

"This behavior did include extremely cruel, at times gleeful, pleasure in the suffering of others and scenes that are almost like those out of a carnival, scenes of bloody massacre, where people are elated – clapping, cheering - at what is happening, in ways that might be incomprehensible to them if you were to ask them about it and that they may very well repress or suppress in later life."⁸⁵

An event I witnessed few years ago also was carrying these characteristics:

My friend visited me in the city of my birth, where I was at the time on holidays. One evening we went to the old market, as I wanted to show her the city centre. On that day Poznań football team won the Polish championship. Large crowd of several hundreds of people were gathered in one corner of the square. My friend got very interested and wanted to inquire about what is happening. When we got closer, we realized that the crowd besieged the squatted building. Football supporters were throwing flares inside, and with each flare flying towards the building the crowd cheered. They were trying to break the doors and get inside. From windows on the upper floors people, now trapped, were peaking out. I was wondering where the police were. After a few minutes police cars arrived and officers in helmets got out of them holding batons and shields. I told my friend we should go now. We left the crowd.

This needs perhaps a bit of context. The hooliganism that happens among football fans is widely associated with nationalism and conservative values in Poland. That includes homophobia, antiimmigration attitudes, claims to Catholic values and fervent patriotism. Each of

⁸⁵ LaCapra, p. 165-166.

these many layers, complicated connections and entangled genealogy would take up a lot of research and text to try to distinguish, so I will not do that here. Similarly, the squatting movement is being associated with what in Polish context could be seen as a leftist militant movement. It is connected with punk culture, anarchism, antinazism, promoting loving whomever you like no matter your sex, sexual orientation and race.

Knowing these narratives I could guess that for the right wing, again, in great simplification that is always a distortion of complex reality and serves as a shorthand here, squat is a nest of decadence and perversity. Choosing to celebrate winning a football championship by their team by attacking in an attempt to destroy something, something that, in my understanding of the situation is perceived as other, perhaps threatening to their identity, was a choice that was hard for me to comprehend. Yet it bears similarities to the events of the summer in 1944 in France when liberation led the beaten and downtrodden to revanchism. These kind of violent acts that repeat themselves in Poland on different occasions, at so called “marches of equality”, gay pride events or on independence day are commented on by publicists as conscious choices made by the perpetrators. Yet, in my view, there can be many forces at play within the person and in the collective consciousness that escape awareness. They might be seen, but their placing and where they come from might go unidentified. Or they might be felt as different kinds of affects yet go unnamed, and even less understood. I think that is what LaCapra implied when he wrote:

“(…) there are aspects of ideology that may not be altogether conscious to the person, at least in terms of the way these aspects operate or are captivating. People may be aware that they are doing something, but they may not entirely know what they are doing (say, enacting a radically transgressive, scapegoating – or quasi-sacrificial, ”sublime” scenario).”⁸⁶

The role of the aforementioned works by Krall, Roberts and Périot I see as making these forces under the spell of which we might operate visible. To give us a sobering view of violence being done to a person that is like us rather than objectified, or designated for some other reason for destruction or removal for “the benefit” of the community.

Joanna Tokarska - Bakir, makes a similar point in her essay “Wy z Jedwabnego” [You from Jedwabne] that is commenting book by Anna Bikont “My z Jedwabnego” [We from Jedwabne], a detailed reportage investigating in early 2000s massacre committed on Polish Jewish population by their Polish neighbours during Second World War:

⁸⁶ Ibidem, p. 166.

““We from Jedwabne” opens (...) before the reader an entirely new perspective. It is the unreachable for scientific works perspective of intimacy, in which through Anna Bikont we are stepping into, with Marianna and Stanisław Ramotowscy, Antonina Wyrzykowska and her husband, with Chajna Finkelsztejn or “Mejerczyk” Ronen. Reading Jan Tomasz Gross’s book “Neighbours”⁸⁷ no one stands so much the chance to remember that Wasersztajn was being called in Jedwabne “Szmulek” and “Stasiulek”, and after reading Bikont’s book, describing the meeting of grandma Szmit with Wasersztajn, saved from pogrom, it is that information that may remain in readers memory.

Jews and Poles, Poles and Jews stop being sides on cleanly swept backyards. Reader experiences a peculiar pleasure at the thought that all of them are real. Succumbs to childish temptation of familiarity with them (“miss Marianka”, “Antosia”⁸⁸).

At that moment “socio-political history of Łomżyński region in between the world wars and later” suddenly stops being aloof. Until one does not know the survivors from Jedwabne by name, the German saying “it stinks badly with Jews in here”,⁸⁹ is as real as the grimace of a man-eating giant from a fairytale.”⁹⁰

What all of these works have in common is that people who may seem as distant historical characters can become real people akin to us in our imagination, and we can start a process of imagining of what it could be that they went through, engaging in it also our emotions. Following LaCapra I see that aspect of historical understanding as crucial if the history is to be properly acknowledged. Intellectual and emotional recognitions are not the same. Adding the latter can be helpful in my opinion in incorporating, internalizing the lessons that the history may actually carry and in this way be valuable in better recognizing the way we want to build our present and plan for the future. The ethics we would like to live by can be informed by situations in which dignity was denied to someone in the past.

⁸⁷ Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*.

⁸⁸ These are diminutive forms of first names. It is common in Poland that most names have one or many diminutive forms. Some are widely known and recognized, close people can always add to them. As with my first name, that is Jakub, apart from official situations everyone calls me Kuba, which is a widely recognized diminutive form of my first name. I like to explain it, as it is often called a nickname. In Polish context a nickname is created based on the name or event but is distinct from the diminutive for of the name..

⁸⁹ Anna Bikont, *My z Jedwabnego*, Wydawnictwo Czarne, Wołowiec, p. 28.

⁹⁰ Joanna Tokarska - Bakir, “Wy z Jedwabnego” [You from Jedwabne], in *op. cit.*, p. 192.

5. What can it mean to come from “Poland”?⁹¹

5.1. Does Polish culture exist?

There is a Polish writer, Witold Gombrowicz, who was particularly preoccupied with the form and formlessness. What role we are being prescribed by those with whom we interact. Are they making a fool out of us, do they see us as someone situated higher than them, are we treated like children? He wrestled with the question of how not to let others push you into any form, how to dodge their attempts, and yet wondered can one occupy the space between the forms, or does one leaving one form enters another one immediately? How much one is in control of that process? Can one make a form for oneself and get others to recognize it? Forms are analyzed, deconstructed and battled with. That's how I see Gombrowicz's legacy and why I value his work. Perhaps it is a fight to find a position that is separate, not assigned, or to be somehow indeterminate.

Towards the end of his life Gombrowicz composed “A kind of testament”⁹², in which in characteristic tone of a jester or a trickster, that allows him perhaps to be less fixed into a form, he reflects on what is Poland, Polishness and being Polish:

“(…) I could add a hundred more, two hundred more shades of personality... each one independent of the others, following a path of its own.

Of what literary expression would I be capable? How could I fend for myself in these conditions?

A Frenchman or an Englishman never experiences such lack of harmony - at least not to this extent. Whatever a Frenchman or an Englishman might feel individually, even if he is profoundly torn within himself, he will always seek refuge in a certain national, English or French, form, which has been elaborated over centuries.

I was Polish.

The passages in my diary where I mention ‘Polishness’ have only been read very superficially by western readers. I was almost told: ‘You’d better cut all

⁹¹ I am writing Poland here in inverted commas to open it up, to suspend any sense of stability as to its meaning. To open it up for finding what it can mean to us, what it can mean to me, what can be it's historical and current social meaning.

⁹² Witold Gombrowicz, A kind of testament, Dalkey Archive Press, Champaign, London 2007.

that. What that has got to do with us?' It is high time that heirs of superior cultures stopped turning up their noses. Instead of 'Poland' put Argentina, Canada, Romania, and so on, and you'll see that my allusions (and my sufferings) can be applied to most of the globe. They concern all secondary European cultures. Look at them closer: you'll see that they constitute a poison which may affect *you* too."⁹³

What could this poison be? Reading further we'll see that it could be wrestling with forms as something to be suspicious of and wrestling with formlessness too. Gombrowicz's life's struggle could be in my opinion described as a struggle with Polishness and forms it proposes, it circulates and imposes. Deconstructing them, attacking them, freeing the self from them. Reading him is very useful for that kind of work. Yet living that form what form one can end up in? Can it be not belonging, a split, textile that unweaves into many separate threads as Gombrowicz is suggesting in the fragment above? At some point he says that there can be no other point of reference for us, than a fellow human being. No ideology, no concept overriding that.

What he refers to as cultural centers, as we see, are the narratives of some of the dominating European cultures: French and English. Even though he spent a big part of his life in Argentina, he kept writing in Polish about Poland and his points of reference when it comes to philosophy and literature remained European. Also in this fragment we can see that there seems to be in his perspective no alternative to stronger European cultures and peripheral to them, therefore not really different but under their influence, that he mentions: Canada, Romania, Argentina. I would like to question this assumption as a dilemma that if not falsely, is laid in a way that is not creating conditions for building a better position for oneself. It seems that they are addressed as stronger forms, forms that hold themselves better - as he writes, something French or English people can fall on in times of crisis - and are imposing towards others, in Gombrowicz's words, "secondary cultures". Or those cultures are seen in terms of lacking - cultures having a form and once that are more formless. There is no acknowledgement of cultures that, deemed perhaps from this perspective as unimportant, meaningless, things of a past, earlier stages of human evolution and so forth, are actually amounting to the richness of human activity. Many other cultures with their philosophy, worldviews, concepts. In Gombrowicz's world they seem out of scope. In this I see his great limitation.

⁹³ Gombrowicz, p. 55-56.

Something that is positioned here as universal is the struggle with the form, “a poison which may affect *you* too”. I think that Gombrowicz suggests that if digging deep enough within ourselves all forms can be questioned, and that this fact pertains to all of us. Perhaps it is possible to accept this, however I would suggest that his way of handling this struggle is particular for the region he is coming from, the class - the intelligentsia coming from landowners, and historical period. In other words, I would say that he aims at universality, as a phenomenon that he seems to attribute to dominant European cultures to which he aspires, in the shadow of which he seems to live, and in the shadow of which he sees himself and sees the place where he is coming from. While in fact he is positioned in particularities of his entanglement: certain social and political developments in Poland, particular understanding of “universalism”, personal aspirations and more. I write it not to degrade his work, but rather trying to point out, that concepts of form, formlessness and universality belong to certain cultural context in which Gombrowicz was operating in, and extending them in a single sweeping move to all of humanity does not seem justified, as it erases different ways of conceptualizing of the world around us.

Addressing form again, as with Poland and Polishness, Gombrowicz employs the tactic of trying to dodge, slip away, perhaps to something, however vague:

“I was Polish. I happened to be in Poland. What is Poland?

It is a country between the East and West, where Europe starts to draw to an end, a border country where the East and the West soften into each other. A country of weakened forms... None of the movements of European culture has ever really penetrated Poland, not the Renaissance, not the wars of religion, not the French Revolution, not the Industrial Revolution. Of all these phenomena Poland has felt no more than a muted echo. And the contemporary Russian revolution hasn't been experienced there either, its prefabricated results have simply been (forcibly) imposed. Catholicism? The country is admittedly in the Orbit of Vatican, but Polish Catholicism is passive, it is limited to a rigorous observance of the catechism; it has never collaborated creatively with the Church.

So those plains, open to every wind, had long been the scene of a great compromise between Form and its Degradation. Everything was effaced, disintegrated... Poland deprived of those great cities (and their bourgeoisie) where life can be concentrated and complicated, where it can arise and flourish, had a rural, peasant culture, yes, a culture represented by squires and priests.

The nobleman sitting in his farmstead made the peasant do the work, and the village priest the oracle. This feeling of formlessness tortured the Poles, but at the same time it gave them a strange sense of liberty. It was one of the basic causes of their admiration of their 'Polishness'.

Please understand the additional difficulty of my position, compared with that of other western writers. Had I been born in France or England I would have known how to behave better!"⁹⁴

Jan Sowa in his book "The King's Phantom Body. A peripheral struggle with the modern form." starts with a very strong assertion that there is nothing in Poland that could be an alternative for the civilisation that arose to the West of it, that was based on Roman law and emergence of bourgeoisie in the cities, that forced renegotiation of social deal previously dividing the classes to clergy, aristocracy, peasantry and royalty. Poland and Polish culture in that perspective do not have a standing in their own right, they do not bring or represent anything in itself that would be worth following or be seen as nourishing in significant way the current productive threads of this (European?) culture. Gombrowicz seems to suggest that the certain formlessness, freedom from forms and from deeper penetration of any ideologies could be seen as an advantage. It seems to fuel his own position of a jester challenging forms that his "Western European" counterparts take for granted.

Czesław Miłosz in his book "Native Realm. A search for self - definition" writes of relations between Eastern and Western Europe differently. Visiting Paris and talking to his uncle who lived there for many years now, he departs from their interaction to make wider reflection:

"Kind to my ignorance, he listened to my remarks about France. He was not an observer. He loved his adopted country in every detail, in its past, in the tissue of its daily life. "Careful, careful. As long as you must give opinions on France, remember, [we were along the park fence on the streetside where men in blue denims were repairing the gas pipes] that in every French worker like those there lives two thousands years of civilization." Then he lapsed into one of his furies, to which I later became accustomed: "*Vous, les Slavs, vous êtes des fainéant! Fainéants!*" [You, Slavs, you are idlers! Idlers!] I remember that exclamation long after his death, as I listened to the deep Russian voice saying: "We'll teach them

⁹⁴ 56-57, a kind of testament

to work!” Who was right? Does virtue express itself in the patient shaping of the landscape over the centuries, in the bustling about the vineyards, in the carving of oaken Louis XIII and Louis XV wardrobes, in the slow, rhythmic work of a skeptical and experienced people who lighten the strain of their tasks with pauses, a chat, a glass of wine - or is it expressed by sudden thrusts of will capable of raising a St. Petersburg out of the swamps on the Neva, and of releasing interplanetary rockets from the empty steppes? Men who understand their place in the world differently cannot be measured by a common standard.”⁹⁵

Though this text arguably still favours western European culture, it is more generous though than Gombrowicz’s take. It asserts that there are different perspectives and it is impossible to evaluate them both, looking through lenses of one of them. Though it is not elaborated here I value this comment in a way that it changes the field of possibility. It is not anymore only about cultural center points radiating outwards and their waves deforming and distorting as the distance grows. It is not about mimicry and “distant echoes” as Gombrowicz called them. It is a possibility of there being worldviews in coexistence that might not be about being right or wrong, higher or lower, but a different take on human existence in the world, using different methods and going by different values. This possibility is merely opened here however.

Two of Polish scholars work in interesting ways around the questions of what has shaped society in Poland and what shape it is in. Andrzej Leder does not refer to Renaissance, industrial revolution, French revolution as Gombrowicz does, he tries to trace how did it happen that the Polish society in the symbolic sphere, that is directly affecting behaviours in the political and social spheres, is continuing the form of social relations of masters and servants. Relations that formally are not there anymore. Jan Sowa is looking at the question why Polish society did not develop more of the agora type of relations in which different groups of interest push and pull to arrive at some form of social agreement that is constantly being renegotiated - form present in the Western Europe. The answer to that can be found according to Sowa in the analysis of the historical long duration. The colonization, industrialization and trade that were forming gradually the emerging capitalist economy disrupted and challenged the old system, as a new group, the bourgeoisie, grew in numbers and in power, collapsing the old system that upheld in symbolic sphere power based on bloodline, birth, and God granted order in which each person would have their prescribed place. In Poland however the neighbouring capitalist market brought different results:

⁹⁵ Czesław Miłosz, *Native realm*, p. 166 - 167.

“It was oppression and exploitation greater than ever before, what came from the fact, that rules of its operation were not shaped by the interior logic of feudal system, holding certain limit on the scale of the serfdom resulting from possibility of monetising of the harvest on the local market of limited absorptivity, but external pressure of capitalist market, in which the income from selling crops grew in direct proportionally to its production.

It is worth noting that this disparity, heterogeneity between logic of the capitalist market enforcing continuous increase in the scale of exploitation and the feudal logic of hierarchical relations, in which certain reciprocity should be taking place, the personal character of dependance between the master and the subject, caused tensions, inconsistency in the system generating relations between classes distributing positions in the symbolic field. This inconsistency was destabilizing that field from its medieval equilibrium, in the sphere of imagination it was causing the appearance of tendency to constantly deepening the imaginary gap, separating master from the peasant.” [T. M.]⁹⁶

Aristocracy was very concerned about its hold on power and wanted to secure it both in law and in the symbolic sphere. The former was changed in such a way as to cripple growth of the cities and the power of the king, so that it would be the sole group deciding the matters of the state and its own fate. The latter was done even more astonishingly by giving rise to the sarmatian ideology: .

“(…) gentry considered itself as a nation, what found reflection in sarmatian myth of distinct origin. It gives us interesting situation, in which relation of the elites towards the rest of the society had colonial character by virtue of auto-definition of those elites: in this phantasm gentry as group of warriors arriving from the steppes of central Asia conquered the settled, farming population of Central - Eastern Europe”. [T. M.]⁹⁷

In this way aristocracy blocked the possibility of any class mobility. They were a different nation, having different virtues, the race of masters if you will.

⁹⁶ Leder, op. cit., chapter: PO TRZECIE: Reforma rolna, podrozdział: Ekonomia polityczna sarmackiego imaginarij.

⁹⁷ Leder, op. cit., w rozdziale: PO TRZECIE: Reforma rolna, podrozdział: Ekonomia polityczna sarmackiego imaginarij [T.M.]

This can serve to show that at the outskirts of the core European countries where capitalism emerged there was a state that positioned itself in such a way that it preserved its status quo of a small rich group of masters and majority of peasants whose status slowly but surely deteriorated to that akin to a slave. Gentry preserved its privilege as long as it could, as Sowa shows in his text, deluding themselves about the place, power and character of Polish state among its neighbouring nations. While they saw themselves as enjoying exceptional “golden freedom” in comparison to states in the region where aristocracy was limited by different powers, the visitors from abroad were at times astonished as to how this state still holds together with almost no central governance, run by regional landlords literally minding their own business. Finally Polish state did collapse under pressure of the growing neighbouring empires: Swedish invasion, the uprising of Bohdan Khmelnytsky, Ukrainian Hetman brought it down and Russian, German, Austro - Hungarian rulers took it apart, so that Polish state disappeared from the maps for more than 120 years.

The language has survived and due to efforts of some people Poland reemerged with the new post World War One order. Those people must have thought that it is worthwhile to preserve their way of speaking, their field of imagination, what they might have considered as their heritage. Perhaps to preserve themselves. Although it is good to acknowledge that some might have wanted to become masters with no masters above them, as the “reborn” Polish state upheld the old order and failed in not carrying through reforms that would improve the situation of peasants and workers, persecuting the communist and socialist movements.

When accepting Sowa’s and Gombrowicz’s perspectives, one can think that this culture is confined to mimicry, did not obtain or build a form of its own, and one of its standing out characteristics can be formlessness. It is worth asking what network of concepts Jan Sowa is in while referring to Poland and its culture as not existent? Some of the main references are Immanuel Wallerstein, the French Annales School of historical writing and their *longue durée* (the long term) concept, Sigmund Freud and ideas developed by Jacques Lacan and postcolonial theory mainly focusing on writings of Edward W. Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Still he operates using center and margins binary, and points out to ““Western - centric” character of postcolonial theory as such”.⁹⁸ What he means by it is that these theories are often developed in the institutions of “the center”, the universities of recent colonial powers and necessarily use their structures, language and frameworks. Could there be

⁹⁸ Sowa, p. 441.

other ways of knowing, of communicating, I would even say “of being” that alternate towards the center, or exist in its orbit, but curve out spaces of their own?

Could turning to and learning about folk culture and alternative modes of being in it serve as an answer to that, as an alternative? I am not sure. I was trying to partly establish that already when writing about Pobłocki’s essay “Szeptana historia Polski” (Whispered history of Poland). What I haven’t mentioned so far is that the narrative that Pobłocki builds in it is that of parallel history to that written by the aristocracy and later elites, who are inheritors and continuators of their history and legacy. Writing about peasant uprisings and revolution of 1905 that get misrepresented or get little to no coverage in the history at schools, Pobłocki gently but firmly puts forward a narrative of the unacknowledged agency the masses had over the centuries. The folk revolutions, uprisings, smaller gestures of resistance like hurting working animals to avoid forced labour, what we could call the atmosphere among the people, that all of it amounts to the field of possibility that upper classes had to make their moves and decisions in. That it’s a push back against the elites, that gives or takes away the space for certain things to occur or for them not to happen. It seems that another story could emerge from that, one that is not widely known or recognized right now, of people in different positions and following different actions and values than current heroic characters in histories we are learning. It seems to me that the author is in the process of building this proposition further and I think it is an interesting one to follow and to make note of it here.

5.2. What or who to lean on?

“And how, in my fight for identity I could lean on my national cultural tradition?

Of course there was a Polish form, a fairly obvious one, Sarmatian style! But it was not very substantial; it already contained destructive fragility. Where was the original Polish thought, Polish philosophy, Polish intellectual and spiritual participation in European creativity? For a hundred and fifty years literature had been stifled by the trauma of our loss of independence - it was reduced to the dimensions of our local misfortune. Mickiewicz⁹⁹ was the greatest figure in Polish

⁹⁹ Adam Mickiewicz’s biographical note in the footnote of *A kind of testament*: “Adam Bernard Mickiewicz (1798-1855), Polish playwright, poet, and novelist. In 1822, he published a book of verse, *Ballady i romanse*, which has been described as heralding the Polish romantic movement. He also wrote the poetic

literature. How could I base myself on Mickiewicz, a magnificent poet, but whose views and ideas were those of a pious child lost in an ingenuous mysticism? Could I fend for myself by leaning on him? We only have to compare Mickiewicz with Goethe to realize how absurd such a plan was.”¹⁰⁰

Who to lean on? It is a great question. I think it is very interesting how Tomasz Żukowski writes about it in his article on a short story by Tadeusz Różewicz. He is opening it by referring to what literary critic Jan Błoński wrote about the poem “Campo dei fiori”¹⁰¹ by Czesław Miłosz in his essay “Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto” (Poor Polish look at the ghetto - T. M.). Miłosz’s poem depicts a situation in which on two sides of the wall there are two diametrically different situations taking place, two realities one could say, that somehow form one. On the ghetto side of the wall the uprising of its Polish Jewish and Jewish Nonepolish inhabitants was being crushed by German forces, while on the so called aryan side, there was an amusement park with its laughs and joys. Błoński claimed that Miłosz with his poem saves the honor of Polish poetry. Żukowski insists Miłosz’s poem was an exception to reactions of the majority that were unmoved, hostile or participated in persecution of Polish Jewish population. The most important for me here fragment follows that reflection:

“Although I cannot care for the honor of Poland or of Polish poetry, and even less can I build on it collective feeling of contentment, I understand Błoński’s relief that there was someone who noticed and wanted to mourn the victims. Miłosz was an exception, it’s true, but without such exceptions the decisive and the deciding majority would not have an alternative. What is at stakes here is the conditions of life (not only intellectual); the chance to find yourself in your own culture.” [T. M.]¹⁰²

Not often have I encountered a statement about not caring about the honour of one’s state or it’s collected under national umbrella literary works. It feels sacreligious. It brings the fear of an attack in response to such a statement, an anticipation that a stone might fly now to hit the author of these words to punish him for dismissing Polish honour as if it’s something

drama *Dziady* in 1827; two poetic novels, *Grazyna* (1823) and *Konrad Wallenrod* (1828); and his masterpiece *Pan Tadeusz* (1834).” In Gombrowicz, p. 57.

¹⁰⁰ Gombrowicz, p. 57-58.

¹⁰¹ Text of the poem translated into English can be found here:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49751/campo-dei-fiori>

¹⁰² Tomasz Żukowski: “Biografia z piętnem. O “Drewnianym karabinie” Tadeusza Różewicza”, in *Niepokoje. Twórczość Tadeusza Różewicza wobec Zagłady*. Ed. P. Krupiński. Wydawnictwo ŻIH. Warszawa, 2014, p. 31.

unimportant while the identities of so many people are very invested in it. And different objects did fly when I was walking in the marches of equality more than 10 years ago in my hometown of Poznań. We were walking in them demanding the right to decide about one's love interest and sexual preferences to be acknowledged and protected. It seemed it was perceived as dishonour by part of the society. Symbolic and physical violence followed.

In this way Żukowski makes the possibility of rejecting the dominant narratives and looking for what one sees as more beneficial alternatives more tangible. Such an alternative, something to lean on in one's own culture he finds in works of Tadeusz Różewicz. This writer for him "Was making space, where you could feel like it is yours too."¹⁰³ Experiences of war and Holocaust, sometimes more, sometimes less directly addressed in Różewicz's writing were largely what he was taking up within his oeuvre.

"Różewicz took on this subject, coming from critique of Polish culture - today I would say majority's practices of domination - and the memory of the victims was conjoined with the project of the new ethics. It stood in the center as a premise for the necessary change."¹⁰⁴

I find that proposition very important, to hold the memory of the victims as a major point of reference for guidance in how to do better in the present day.

Różewicz is known for treating the heroic narratives with realistic detail that does not allow them to turn into bronze figures that would make it possible for us to dream the heroic dreams in separation from how they were actually realised. Some examples can include the protagonist of theater play "The Card Index" who rejects impatiently his lover from the time of war saying that he acted under pressure of the circumstances, thinking that they might die at any moment and has no interest to continue their love affair right now. Another comes from theatre play "Do piachu" (To the dirt - T. M.) that shows a partisan unit that is part of Polish underground forces during and after World War Two. During their time in the forest members of the unit are involved in rape, robbery and drunkenness. In response, partisans need to execute its member that did not escape the crime scene. He is their colleague and all the ambiguities of that situation are at play. These are not patriotic heroes any more doing their brave acts of fight for independence but human beings caught up in situations that are emotionally, politically, socially complex.

¹⁰³ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁴ Ibidem.

One of the most poignant scenes in that sense in my opinion is when an officer from another underground formation (there were several that were competing, entering alliances etc.) joins the unit. He clearly comes from the upper class and he opposes using the same latrine as the privates. He says that an officer cannot be seen by his subordinates in that situation. This scene seems to be a key to Różewicz's project of demythologizing romantic patriotic narratives. The officer insists that he cannot appear to the soldiers as someone like them. There needs to be a distance created, this body function needs to disappear from the view, the latrine needs to be distinguished.

Andrzej Leder, analyzing continuous existence of master and servant relationship in the Polish imaginarium writes:

"The symbolic field shaping Polishness up until 1939 took the form of structure justifying domination of aristocracy, and later the bureaucratic and military elites - domination, the other side of which was subordination and humiliation of all remaining humanity, and most of all the peasantry." [T.M.]¹⁰⁵

This is the dynamic that in my opinion is still the basis for the daily interactions in Poland. You can either dominate or be dominated. Visiting the newly renovated central public library in my home town in Poznań in Poland I saw that a lot has changed since a decade ago. Catalogue could be browsed now on computers, readers accounts are online, books are scanned - all of that was done with pen and paper when I was still living there. The place is spacious, colourful, well designed, soft sitting places are scattered around. One thing that did not change however is the relations between the users and the staff. In the manner that public officials in other institution push around the petents¹⁰⁶ librarians terrorize you from the get go to establish the relations immediately: Sit there! Read the regulations! Drinking liquids is forbidden! Don't stretch out on the sofa, this is a library! Washing teeth in the bathroom is not allowed!

As I have witnessed it, it can be easily reversed. Young girl who was not served to her satisfaction, and what was jeopardizing her studies, reprimanded the librarian and the roles were switched immediately - higher tone of voice, self righteousness and strong conviction seemed to be enough to swap the positions from lower to higher and higher to lower. This seems to me is done preemptively when relations are largely based on violence. From my observations the logic applied is that in order to avoid being humiliated one needs to establish

¹⁰⁵ Leder, op. cit.

¹⁰⁶ The distinction between the petent and the client was used in a TV ad by one of the commercial banks to underline the high quality of their customer service.

oneself in a position of power to secure oneself in the strongest possible way. Let's think of the cashier saying rudely when you are approaching them in the supermarket: "Don't stand here. Stand there!" You are immediately pushed into a situation in which if you simply follow you are subordinating to mistreatment. If you respond you are starting a confrontation. These kinds of interactions were analyzed by Gombrowicz in his writings, thinking how to deal with these kinds of situations to our advantage. Leder analysis fragment of Gombrowicz's "Ferdydurke", in particular how higher position is established, manifested and how humiliating and being humiliated make can make whole:

"Gombrowicz very acutely grasps the core of that relation, writing that the status of the sovereign in this situation is: "to be seen by your boor!". That's why squire against those "boors" eats cheese and strawberries, against them he performs mystification of a laughter, against them strange and unreal customs. And at the same time it is for them, so they can admire, experience superiority of their masters through humiliation, so that "the mystical buckle, bonding what's master's and what's boor's" can last." [T. M.]¹⁰⁷

Leder further elaborates his argumentation drawing from psychoanalysis (being cultural philosopher and psychoanalyst by profession) by talking about the delight of the humiliated subject at their master's superiority. The former accepting their place "in the universe" that has been prescribed to them might find pleasure at acts that confirm it and discomfort at disturbing it. Leder shows it quoting another fragment from Gombrowicz's "Ferdydurke", in which two young men, descendants of the landowners, take a walk in the village, and when encountering peasants they address them by calling them "friend" and "citizen". To that they get increasingly hostile responses, as it disturbs the accepted order. When suddenly granted dignity by their superior peasants, according to Leder, might see the misery of their situation for which they would have to take responsibility as sovereign subjects. Living in utter poverty and degradation such sudden disappearance of ideas covering the brutal reality of one person egotistically exploiting the other, equal human being, might be too much to bear.

Both Sowa and Leder refer to Gombrowicz, as he did dedicate his life's work to analyze, deconstruct and break away from the myths functioning in Polish psyche. One of the things I greatly appreciate about him is trying to go to the heart of the matter and not stepping back from tackling the sanctified and petrified traditions. One of most famous fragments of his prose that

¹⁰⁷ Leder, op. cit.

gained popularity at school and beyond it is: “Slowacki, oh what a great poet he was!”¹⁰⁸ Słowacki was one of the romantic poets who gained the status of a national bard along with Mickiewicz. One of the chapter’s in Gombrowicz’s novel “*Ferdydurke*” takes place at school, in the classroom, where the bottom argument for importance of Słowacki for the education, the culture and the people is that very phrase: “Slowacki, oh what a great poet he was!” I think that Gombrowicz not only points towards lack of critical thinking in the educational system, and in the wider culture, but to the tendency of petrifying objects of cult within the culture. The way these objects are active is as focal points in national mythology. They still hold symbolic power in the imaginations, but they are not necessarily being reviewed as to their meaning. Their historical circumstances and actuality they have or have not, the meaning we see in it and how it has changed over time should be looked at consciously to acknowledge what are the forces at play when we say “Slowacki, oh what a great poet he was!” It is a call for a more sober view of one’s position and culture, rather than allowing oneself to be drunk with the content of national myths.

The leading figure, the most cherished among the Polish romantic poets considered as national bards is Adam Mickiewicz. Gombrowicz in the fragment I have quoted above acknowledges his skill but dismisses his ideas. Mickiewicz as someone immature and carried away by romanticised visions of the nation can’t be someone to lean on. Still the comparison of Mickiewicz and Goethe appears there because the shadow of Mickiewicz looms over Poland, its literature and culture just like the shadow of Goethe is present in the cultural life of Germany. Gombrowicz struck at national bard after whom squares, streets and universities have been named, like my alma mater, latin “generous mother”, a phrase used to refer to school one has formerly attended, and whose generosity I want to problematize and question here. This has happened a while ago (this text was first published in 1968), but that did not affect the culture at large. The myth of Poland as the messiah of the nations that Mickiewicz participated in creating could be still said to dominate the collective imagination. It is iterating this society as the one of victims that suffer for humanity at large, a nation that suffers in the name of and for the sins of all nations. On the level of anecdote this sentiment can be traced in what some treat as a joke and some might take more seriously, that after Polish representation loses a football match there can appear and reappear comments that however they lost when it comes to score of the

¹⁰⁸ Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, Translated from the Polish by Danuta Borchardt, Foreword by Susan Sontag, 1938, Translation copyright 2000.

goals they are the moral winners. On another level, Tokarska - Bakir writes of "obsession with innocence" in the context of participation of Polish Nonejewish population in the holocaust, denial of it in the public sphere and trying to take the front place as victims of the World War Two, or creating a symmetry with suffering of the Jewish citizens.

If we reject the Polish national myths stemming from romanticism, what could there be to lean on, what in the spheres of ideas one can find as one's own? Let's follow Gombrowicz further to continue this reflection:

"Most Polish writers of my generation could choose between two alternatives. They could limit themselves to Polish ground, but were thereby condemned to play a secondary role; or they could aspire to a European role, but in this case they were still condemned to a secondary role, because they were merely second-hand Europeans, they could only try to equal Europe and to repeat Europe.

But why not to try to join the major currents of the period, you might ask me. They, too, are homelands, in a certain sense. If not Catholicism, then Communism or Fascism.

Catholicism, me, an unbeliever?

Communism or Fascism, me, an unbeliever?

No, I had no vocation to become a monk who believes, who is afraid of not believing, who does not admit any doubts and who goads himself on his faith. Theories? Ideas? I always knew that they were sieves through which life runs. And the role of the 'committed', progressive intellectual teaching humanity which path to take seemed to me both too pretentious and too frivolous. I want to tell you about my life as simply as possible, so here I should give the least complicated of my arguments: where, I asked, is the certificate that entitles me to guide humanity? And what if I am a fool who simply botches everything and makes other people's positive work more arduous? Is history not full of high-minded individuals whose indomitable high-mindedness has caused countless squabbles and has led to interminable brawls? So - mind your own business and don't go sticking your nose into other people's. You see, for me, the postulate which consisted of speaking only in my own personal name was not simply the elementary prerequisite of a good style: it also proved my moral

sense, my sense of responsibility (and, as usual, this has been wrongly interpreted: my moral scruples have been attributed to my aridity, to my selfishness and my arrogance).

Besides... How could I, a Pole, believe in theories? That would be grotesque. Against the Polish sky, against the sky of a paling, waning Europe, one can see why so much paper coming from the West falls to the ground, into the mud, onto the sand, so that little boys grazing their cows can make the usual use of it. But these theories, which drift across the sky, become ridiculous, blind, ignoble, bloody, vain. Gentle ideas are pregnant with mountains of corpses. What can one do? Everyone sees the world from where he stands. It is not for nothing that I come from the plains which separate Europe from the rest of the world.

Communism, Fascism, the Church, any particular faith?

No.”

As a commentary to that fragment I would like to focus on the nonalignment as a proposition in itself. I find Kush Badhwar’s work “formyfuneral.ppt”¹⁰⁹ that was shown at Festival Ars Moriendi in the Cathedral’s Krypta in Helsinki, helpful in that. In it among other things Badhwar is wondering what form “his end”, his burial could take:¹¹⁰

“how about a parade?
or a state funeral
organised by all those countries
I never plead allegiance to”

It seems that reflecting on a funeral becomes for Badhwar an occasion to think what one falls on in such a moment, what form, be it cultural, religious, national or poetic. Badhwar continues:

“a burial at sea
or lost at sea
lost in space
lost in bass
lost in shopping center
which happened when i was a kid

¹⁰⁹ It is a power point presentation that can be found in its full form here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Laa4S7CV2iU&feature=youtu.be>

¹¹⁰ In the work the text is animated and there are sounds accompanying it at times. Because of limitations of written documents I cannot incorporate these elements and necessarily I am using only the textual part. There are many layers of meanings in that work that are lost in this way.

and i thought i might die”

Humour serves here in my opinion as a tool to open this subject that otherwise could be treated very seriously. Seriously also as to procedures that should be followed when a member of the community dies. Lines “lost in space, lost in bass” jokingly open up this subject from a choice of formally designed ceremonies, like parade, state funeral, or even “a burial at sea”, which form seems more open and poetic, yet can also follow certain existing formulas. Perhaps being lost, not assigning oneself to existing options can be a joyous state, playful state of open possibilities. That is followed by a recollection from a childhood event. I would like to read it as a metaphor for fear or having nothing to hold on to. The figure of death that is brought at this instance indicates here in my reading an image akin to entering the void, having nothing to hold on to. Nonalignment can have in this way both elements at play, openness, playfulness and possibility on one side and disappearance, nonexistence and fear of the void on the other. These can be some of the forces that could be identified as being at play when in that position.

Going back to Gombrowicz, it seems to me that going from one form to another, a transition, when ideas, points of reference and narratives are changing and shifting can be a state of being, but that neutrality and erasure of forms are not possible to attain in some absolute sense. One can be in some way in transition all of the time of course, yet when we act or speak we take a form. When it seems that there is no form, that the meaning is transparent and self evident I would treat it as a clear signal that some ideologies and/or mythological thinking are at work. And I would like to argue for the importance of acknowledging these ideologies and one’s relation to them and entanglement as a work worth pursuing. Work that can even partly reveal to us what kind of historical creation we are to recall James Baldwin’s words opening this thesis, and what do we want to do about it to live in the world we would feel better in, “according to a principle more humane and more liberating (...) which robs history of its tyrannical power, and also changes history.”

Having said that I would like to also acknowledge the value I see in the nonalignment. Badhwars work was striking for me precisely because of denying allegiance to any state. The possibility of that event that took form in his work was something I did not consciously consider or address before encountering it in his work. It was a realisation of the kind: “Oh, so it is possible, someone says it, someone lives this way.” It shifted my inner conviction that we are somehow bound to the states. That our passports, languages, histories and cultures make it impossible to free oneself from their grasp. In this way “formyfuneral.ppt” by making distinction

between the self and the state created an opening, a better possibility for other, not state national forms of being in the world to take place.

What ideas and mythological realities to lean towards making more conscious decisions? I think that it is already in part apparent from my references here, however I would like to add here in a more spelled out way how I see my allegiances. In my search I've found that of those working in the context of Polish culture I find the closest people and their works that I would put into two groups with a disclaimer that it is not at all a neat division: those that fall on the Christian ethics as their fundament, and those who use contemporary theories like psychoanalysis, postcolonial theory and other to rethink and reimagine our reality. All of them I think are working to break the national and other myths that they see as harmful and are looking for a change, for a different way of being, for a more ethical way.

Among those I would put in the first group I would like to mention Tadeusz Mazowiecki, one of the leaders of Solidarność (Solidarity movement), first noncommunist prime minister of Poland in 1989, and in 1992-93 a special reporter to the United Nations Human Rights Commission in former Yugoslavia,¹¹¹ and author of the text "Antysemityzm ludzi łagodnych i dobrych" [Antysemityzm of gentle and good people].¹¹²

Jan Józef Lipski, literary critic and politician, author of the text "Dwie ojczyzny, dwa patriotyzmy" [Two homelands, two patriotisms], an essay on xenophobia among Polish people. In it, towards the end the author confesses that he finds his own emotional and intellectual responses not up to ethical standards he insists it is important to follow. I find this part very important, to address one's own position and to signal that striving for better ethics is a work, that as I argued earlier, perhaps cannot be finished, but needs to be done constantly.

Joanna Tokarska - Bakir, ethnographist and essayist that I have referred to several times in this thesis.

Jan Zieja, Catholic priest who between the wars went on foot on pilgrimage to Rome without a passport to point out fictitiousness of nationality and borders. He got as far as Austria, when he was sent back. Later informal chaplain for members of Solidarność [Solidarity movement].

In the second group I would place Andrzej Leder, Jan Sowa and Tomasz Żukowski to whom I referred to on several occasions. I haven't mentioned but I found influential also

¹¹¹ Tadeusz Mazowiecki resigned from that position when no action was taken after his reports.

¹¹² The quote opening that text gives a good idea of its premise: "The greatest tragedy of Jewish people is not the hate of the antisemite, but that gentle and good people say: "decent person, although Jew" [T. M.] - Ludwik Hirsztel, "Historia jednego życia".

Grzegorz Niziołek, author of the book “Polski teatr zagłady” (Polish Theater of Holocaust - T. M.), the first monography dedicated to theater and Holocaust. Though I did not refer to it directly here it is not without influence on my thinking.

When it comes to mythological reality I have found myself at home more than anywhere else in the novels of Leslie Marmon Silko. The way of relating to nature, the way of being in the world and among people were closer to me than anything else I have encountered in the cultural context I am coming from or anywhere else. To just give a sense of the ways it has affected me, that would be difficult to account for here, I would like to say that I am not afraid anymore to be in the forest after dark. In a way that perhaps would need a separate investigation and body of text to articulate, her works helped me to make a transition from treating natural environment as dangerous and threatening to feeling that I am part of it, that I am at home in it, I belong to it and can be at ease when I'm in it.

The way she writes about community, that, for example there is no individual salvation, individual pursuit of well being, individual interest, but rather there is being interconnected with one another in a way in which we depend on all those things on each other, that I am still processing.

I consider the work that this thesis is dedicated to as ongoing and possibly having no ending.

Conclusions

Shashi Tharoor in the lectures and interviews related to publishing of his book “Inglorious Empire: What British did to India” repeated: “If you don’t know where you’ve come from, you’ll never appreciate where you’re going.” I found it of course interesting in the context of my search, however not elaborated this statement seemed to me elusive in the way aphorisms can be. I found it in this way similar to phrases like: it is important to be yourself in life, follow your heart or live in truth. While I feel like they are engulfing me with their “self explanatory” well meaning that is difficult to dodge, it is also hard to pin any concrete meaning to them, to the point that they may seem meaningless.

As a key to unlock Tharoor’s phrase I’d like to use what Wade Davis tells and writes about the Polynesian Wayfinders. Polynesians travelled between the islands on the Pacific thousands of kilometers apart long before the British invented the chronometer that allowed them to sail away from the shores that have been followed for navigation up until then. What allowed the Polynesians to do so was dead reckoning: “(...) that meant that the navigator had to sit monk like on the stern of the vessel never disturbed by the member of the crew remembering in his mind or/and imagination every shift of wind, every shift of current, every sign of the sea, of the stars of the celestial bodies, the animals of the ocean, the birds of the sky (...).”¹¹³ I would like to use it as a metaphor to build a hypothesis on moving in life. Knowing our origin, with careful observation, remembering and keeping in our imagination as accurate an image of it as we can, perhaps we would be less prone to get lost when chance political winds, cultural currents or stars of fashion appear. Perhaps it can prevent to a degree them becoming suddenly our main point of references, or giving us suddenly new direction promising to arrive in paradise on earth. We can decide how we position our boat when strong wind blows, or we enter a powerful current. Perhaps we can be less susceptible to delusionary dreams and take a direction we actually want to go to, even we cannot foresee what will happen on the way, but we can use all the tools we have right now the way that Wayfinder uses all of the senses to navigate, and see how our journey proceeds. I don’t mean by it rejection of mythological thinking or myths in general. In my opinion it is a part of human set up to create mythological structures. It is important however what kind of myths and stories are these.

¹¹³ Davis, Wade. *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in a Modern World*. Lecture in Oregon Humanities Centre. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fk7bqPr5OjA>

Wade Davis continues telling about Wayfinders by recalling how this practice is being revived today. On one of the contemporary voyages towards Rapa Nui, that is 1850 kilometers from closest inhabited islands, getting close but still having it beyond the visible horizon, the Wayfinder of the Hōkūleʻa vessel fell asleep, and after awakening did not know where they were. This can mean death to the whole crew. The sun came out then and a beam of light fell on his shoulder. He decided to follow it and soon they arrived on the island. Sounding random and accidental, there can be more to it than what's in this testimony, like instinctual thinking, putting together many seemingly unrelated details that are too many to process with rational thinking and arriving at that decision. The point for me is not to argue for validity or not of the method but rather to use it as a basis for further reflection on my topic. I would like to propose to think of it as a question of what myths are we falling on in times of crisis. And what myths form the fundamentals of our thinking and acting. Retelling stories and histories can be in my opinion changing these mythological structures, reconstructing our frame of reference and affecting our decisions. The way we tell and perpetuate stories, the structure we give them, what elements they are built of all of it needs a lot of care. It is a chance to make a change, to defend what we care for, to nourish it and help it grow. What we struggle against can be very powerful, supported by economical, political and social structures that have been well set in place and have a strong hold. To paraphrase opening lines of Silko's novel "Ceremony", their power might be mighty, but we have our stories, and as long as we do, we can take care of the forces that we think are giving life, rather than taking it away.

At this point it is a very fragile hypothesis that needs better articulation, yet it has been accompanying me throughout this journey, so I wanted to propose it here underlining the for its further consideration.

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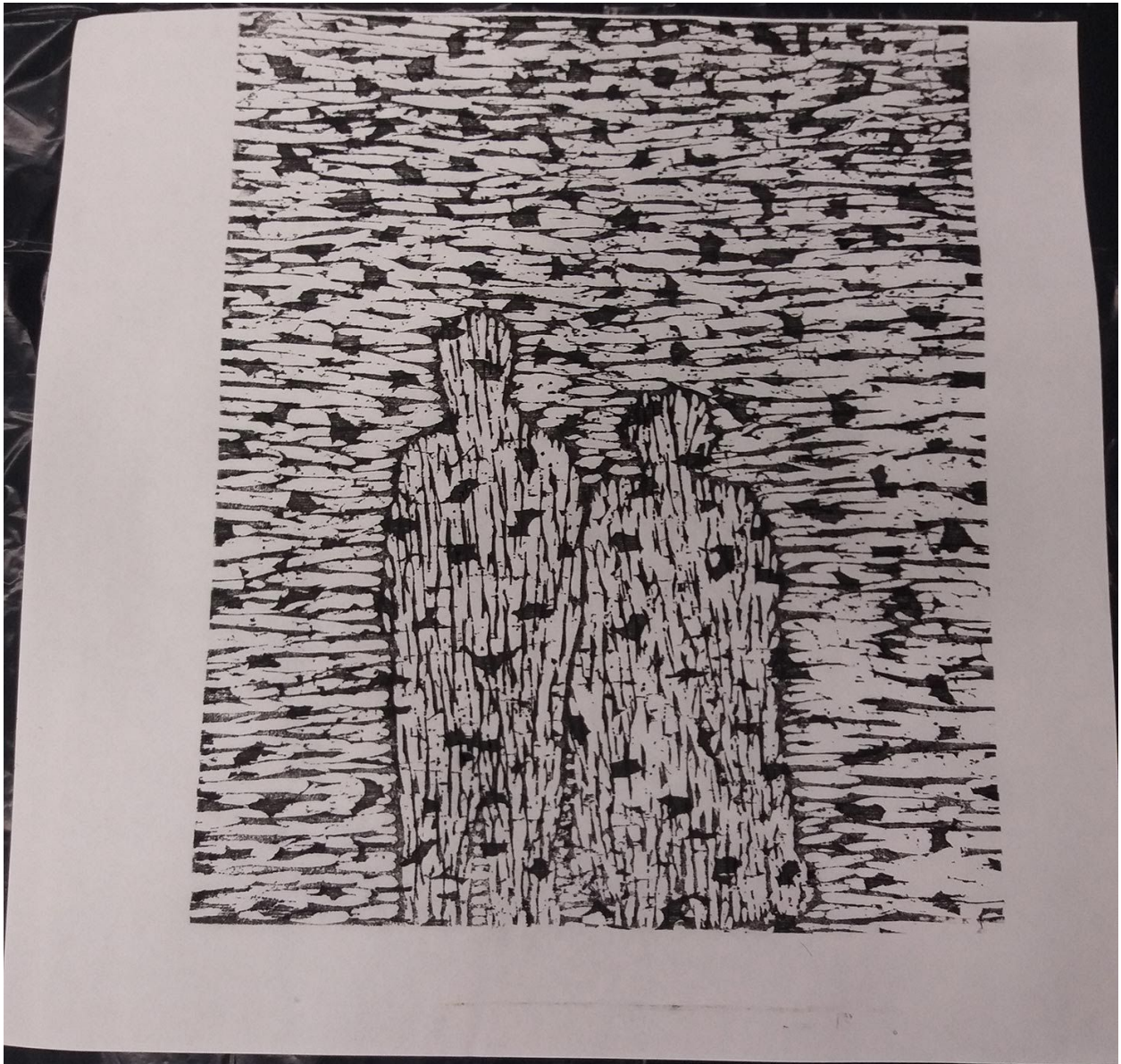
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Appendix



Untitled, woodcut, oil-based ink and turpentine on paper, 2019



Untitled, woodcut, sumi ink on paper, 2020

Unfortunately I don't have access to the original print at the moment and I can't provide a better image of it here.

Every rock is different

In her second novel “The Almanac of the Dead” Leslie Marmon Silko wrote a scene in which three men drive in the desert to find a pick up spot for the drug delivery from Mexico. One of the men is an older native man, he is the boss, and there are two young guys with him. At one point one of the younger men tired with monotonous landscape offhandedly remarks that all these rocks lying about in the desert are all the same. The older man got seriously angry hearing that and he stopped the car, forced them out and made them examine the rocks, to acknowledge that each of them is very different, and has its own specific qualities.

To give this a little context I must say that the native drug smugglers in that novel are positioned as people who fight the white man and the drugs are the instrument of that fight. It is the poison they serve back to the white people. Making a connection with her earlier novel, “Ceremony”, one can see that white people, though somewhat differently, still are positioned as the destroyers. People who perpetuating their thoughts and actions are spreading destruction over the world. Native people and black people are the ones who struggle against them and whose ways are those of preservation, not in freezing or petrifying sense, but doing it through nourishment and renewal. And the novel contains descriptions of how the god of white people was dead already at their arrival to Americas, as it didn't have any power to heal it's people and was rather devouring them (Inquisition, religious wars and so on). Native people cherish nature and are grateful to it for what it offers them and are looking for ways of renewal if the connection is broken or there is a need for a change in the situation of the community.

The only white person who is given any credit by characters in the book is Karl Marks, largely considered to be a fool as well, but he had some good points he made, one of them concludes.

Coming back to the rocks, what happened in the scene I have described could be addressed with ideas Elaine Jahner proposed in her essay “An Act of Attention: Event Structure in *Ceremony*”. This act of attention she connects to a different kind of narrative structure that is not driven by action understood as a chain of events one leading to another, but focuses on experience of the event, stays with the event, contemplates the different aspects of it. Jahner suggests that this can point us to better understanding of the difference between written and oral traditions.

Beneath this text you can see a series of images. Each one page is occupied by the prints from one session during which I was testing different aspects of printing. Each print is different. These differences can be small. More or less colour saturation, blurred or sharp edges, having structure of the wood visible or obliterated. They can be quite subtle, and in this scale they are presented here difficult to discern. I look at times and these prints in their material form browsing through them, and different ones might capture my attention in different ways each time I browse them. I am observing if the same ones will continue to hold my attention over time. I am also interested in them next to each other in their variations and differences and sameness at the same time. My memory of the people whose outline is in those images is mediated by tales about them, as I did not meet them. They are my grandparents. My understanding of those tales changes over time, and points of attention can shift at times too. The shades of emotion and the way they are being recalled also varies. There are some strong elements that return, and the emotional undercurrents that come back with them, but my noticing them is not always the same, my acts of attention are different. At times I listen to what's being told about them and cherish the words that are coming to me, appreciating that moment and what is being shared with me, the emotions that rise up with the telling, the effort and the will of the storyteller to convey it to me. I listen and hear the words and am welcoming their coming. On other occasions I half listen, I don't know what it has to do with me, and what is the point being made if there is any.

These words of the stories can be revealing the fibre of which the storyteller is made of. The marks on the paper the woodblock left can be the shades of my response to what I felt I have received from people in my family that came before me. The iteration of emotional landscape, that is always a bit moving, not settled in its edges.



27 untitled woodblock
prints, 2019

Fragments

Experienced events that cannot be integrated

Trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered. The study of traumatic events poses especially difficult problems in representation and writing both for research and for any dialogic exchange with the past which acknowledges the claims it makes on people and relates it to the present and the future. Being responsive to the traumatic experience of others, notably of victims, implies not the appropriation of their experience but what I would call empathic unsettlement, which should have stylistic effects or more broadly, effects in writing which cannot be reduced to formulas or rules of method.

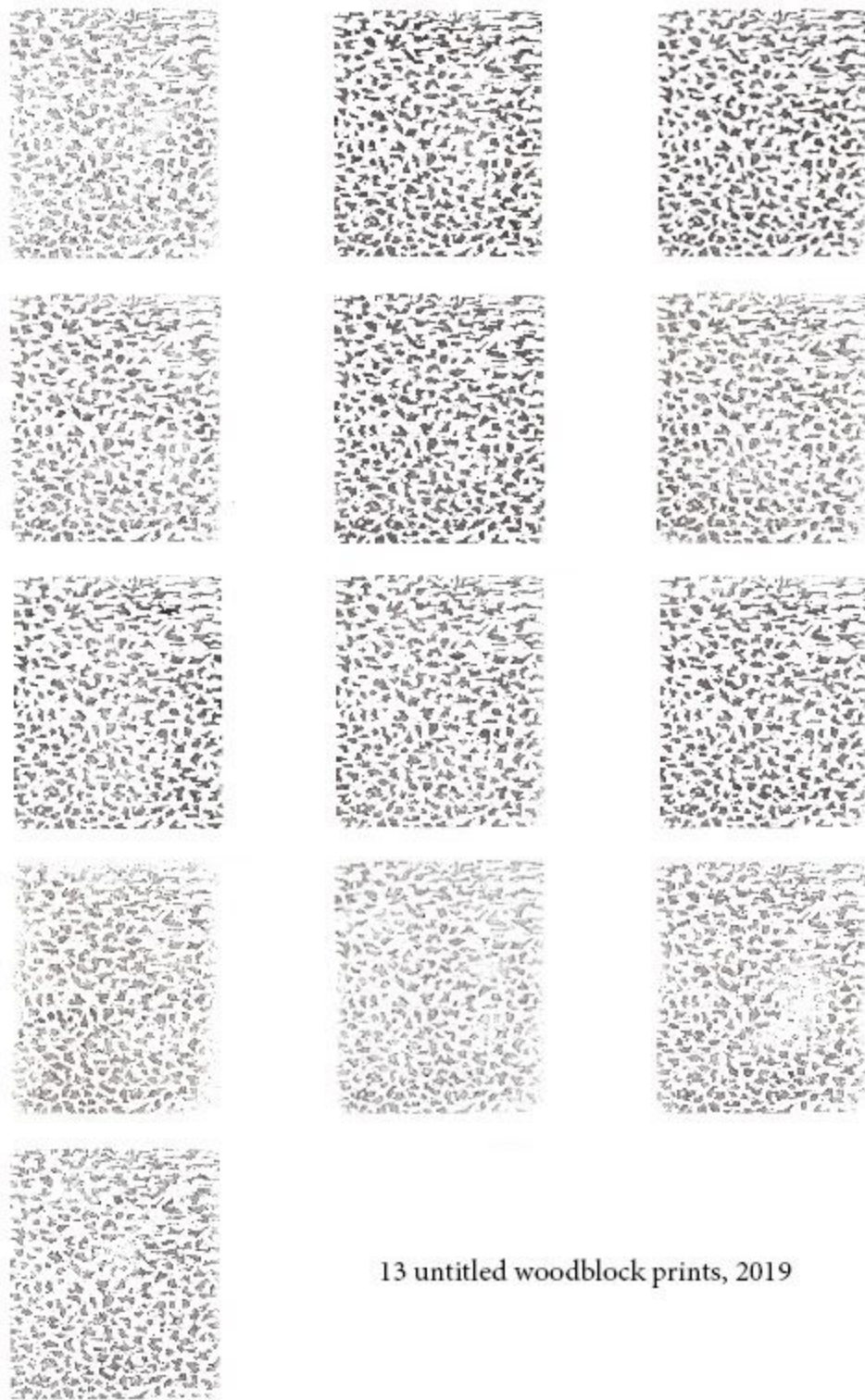
P. 41 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing history, writing trauma*, The John Hopkins University Press 2001.

There can be experiences in our lives of which we don't find the way to talk about. Not even to ourselves. They don't make for a story and cannot be reached with understanding. They can remain strong and keep coming back to us. Replaying themselves over and over, perhaps they are looking for a form, for a meaning. Once deciphered perhaps they could be archived. Their affective force would diminish if not just be dismantled. I could say for example: now I know what it was about, who was the perpetrator who was the victim, I could give sense to the senseless violence. Not to justify it, but to grieve over it, and saddened let it go, letting also myself from that moment rest, retire.

If that moment does not arrive however, I can continue to revisit the scene and relive the experience. Perhaps there is no limit to the number of times to do that. Perhaps it does not wear off the way vhs tapes used to, gradually disintegrating with use.

Possibly there are also events that we did not experience, but we continue to experience their consequences. Something our parents went through, or their parents did. And the emotional composition that this experience has left, and that has been passed on, without necessarily passing on information about the event itself, or without apparent connection to it. Just the emotional entanglement, that wasn't dealt with, perhaps couldn't be dealt with. Fragments of some experience, that are perhaps like bits and pieces flying after an explosion and reaching us long after the explosion has happened, as it happens with catastrophes in the

cosmos. Maybe we cannot put this experience together, cause we don't have access to it, and there never emerged a language to name it and talk about it. So we have these fragments and the emotional radiation they continue to emit. We could try to tame it, to appease it, even partly, putting to rest some of the so called "emotional baggage" that travelled to us through generations. We won't make the connections or retell the story in the way it could be healing, but still maybe we could ease it. Acknowledging it, being with it, is perhaps a step towards that.

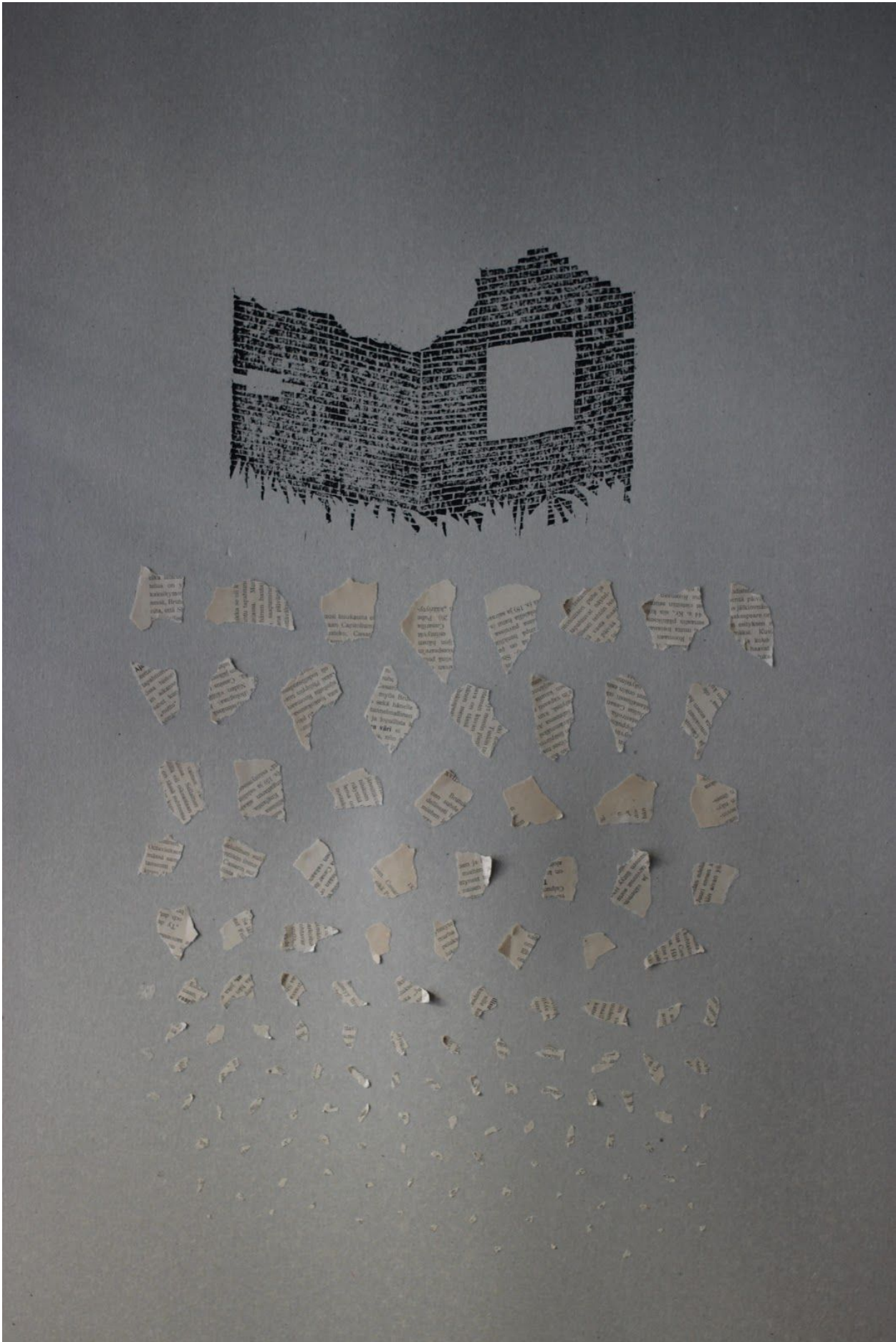


13 untitled woodblock prints, 2019

Some Thoughts on Transient Living After 13 Years of Moving - Jakub Bobrowski

<https://soundcloud.com/vicca-the-home-issue/some-thoughts-on-transcient-living-after-13-years-of-moving-jakub-bobrowski>

Sound recording released as a part of the ViCCA Journal - The Home Issue.



This print was part of an exhibition unfurnished // unfinished curated by Paola Jalili Villarroel and Saara Mahbouba in the beginning of 2018 in Vuosaari in Helsinki. It stems from the event that took place on the 1st of November in 2017. That is the day on which dead members of the community are commemorated in Poland. On the way back from the cemetery we asked my father to stop at the house where he grew up, that is not any more in the hands of our family. He reluctantly agreed. The place changed a lot, and my father was upset, which he expressed by saying how awful all the changes were. To me, they didn't appear good or bad in themselves, so I gathered that my father is feeling raw about the loss. Perhaps more so, as the circumstances in which it left the family could be described as slipping from their hands.

Just outside the fence within which house, barn and stables were, stood a smaller building, now without the roof and trees, weeds and bushes grew in it. That's where the image comes from.

I would like to mention the context for it. This family house belonged before the war to German family. When borders changed, German population largely moved away (voluntarily or forcibly) from land that became part of Polish state. My father's family came from land that is now part of Belarus. After the second world war oftentimes people from lands Polish state lost on the east were relocated to lands it gained on the west. After the second world war, and especially after 1989 when travelling became easier, it is something very recognizable in this part of Europe: people visiting the sites where they grew up, or where their ancestors are coming from. Germans come to Poland and Kaliningrad Oblast, Polish go to Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine, Jewish People go to all of those places and more. It is something one encounters time and again.

In one of the courses, a friend mentioned how a place can be a storage of our memories, and posed a question: what it can mean to lose such a place? A tree that you climbed as a kid, large characteristic stone next to the path, building and objects in it that can trigger memories that would otherwise remain dormant.



Encounter with the stone, May 2018

<https://vimeo.com/266073794>

This is an exercise made for Reality Show / Performance Art Course led by Pilvi Porkola. At the time I was under strong influence of Leslie Marmon Silko's writings. Some of the characters in her novels "Ceremony" and "Almanac of the Dead" relate to nature with reverence. All that they have comes from it. It sustains them. They are grateful. Moreover they see themselves as coming from it, and they see the world as something greater than themselves.

That is very different from the worldview I was born into. In it God gave the earth to humans for them to subject it to themselves. Humans are above all other beings. It is also unclear if the paradise after the final judgment will be here or elsewhere. In any case God can probably fix everything that has been broken or destroyed. These are the premises drawn from my cultural background.

However, reading Silko's works influenced me. The attitudes I have found through her novels I can call my own more than those found within the culture I am coming from. I am looking for the ways to share them. And this work is such an attempt.



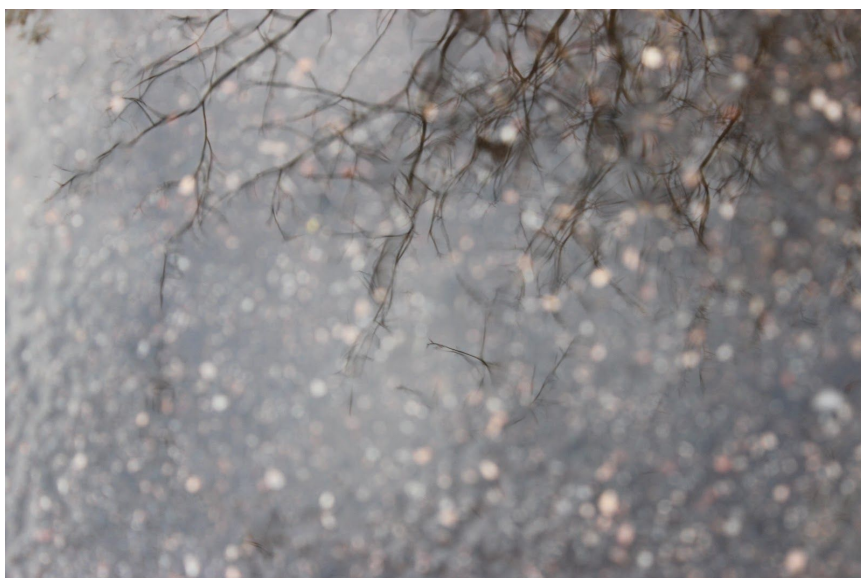
Untitled, December 2017

This piece I made in the Drawing and Painting Workshop led by Thomas Nyqvist. I didn't want to draw or paint, he accepted my idea, and I received a lot of good feedback from him and from fellow participants.

This is the most difficult work to write about, as to do so I need to enter vague and obscure territory that is unclear for me. Yet attitude of Dominick LaCapra in his book "Writing History, Writing Trauma" prompts me to do that, particularly his insistence that when dealing with affects it's hard if not impossible to make neat assertions, still we should strive to make distinctions and name things as much as we can. I think that is connected to his belief that we should think of the future and make feasible propositions for it if we believe in taking ethical responsibility for coexistence in democratic setting. I share his conviction.

During one of the practices we did in a self study group that later was to be called The Munching Group, we were to identify a major element underlying our lives. This for me was sadness. Sometimes I am trying to pin it to something, to some events or circumstances that I can recognize as a possible source of it, but they don't hold strongly enough to account for it. On some level of perceptible emotions it is clear for me and some members of the family that it is about uprootedness and ungrieved losses. It is for example, about being moved by the lyrics of the song *Naci en Alamo*, especially the verses: *No tengo lugar / Y no tengo paisaje / Yo menos tengo patria* (I have no place / And I have no landscape / Still less do I have a homeland). In my generation we have not been living on the move in our childhood and youth, we also grew up in the state we were born in. And yet this feeling is prevalent. Several years ago someone brought it up to me that I do not know where I am coming from. Since then I have been investigating that subject, looking at its different aspects and pondering on it. When I turned to this intentionally, very slowly different things revealed themselves. So I am elsewhere now then when I began. At the time of realizing the work in the photo above, through making it I attempted grieving without knowing what it is that I'm grieving for. The way I wanted to present it was to build several more of those constructions, and place them narrowly at the entrance to the live act I was planning to do, so that if you want to get to the room, you have to pass through them, and inevitably some of the branches would brush over you, and they would gradually break and crumble. I don't know how they would be perceived, but my intention was, that in the connection to what was to happen in the room, they evoke sadness, loss and past that demands to be addressed. One could say, that's the ancestors calling. For their stories to be told. For us to bear witness to their lives, and in this way, each time we recall those stories, to rework the relationship of this past to our present. Leslie Marmon Silko wrote in "Almanac of the Dead", that ancestors are calling for justice incessantly, it has no meaning to them if hundreds or thousands of years have passed.

The paper that occupies the next 8 pages and comprises photographs and text was made for Hybrid Discourses course led by Raphael Dagold. It's title is "1st of November" and it was finalized In October 2017.



i bear witness

i saw leafs falling
i don't know how many

swaying in the air
each in its own way

before it happened
there was perceivable stillness
than sudden motion
followed by perceivable stillness



"I believe that the spirits are your parents
And their parents and their parents and their parents
And they are in your bloodstream
And they run through your body constantly
(...)
And they are trying all the time to tell you shit
And if you just spend a few minutes with yourself
You would hear them
(You would hear them
You would hear them)"

Gil Scott Heron, *Parents (Interlude)* on
I'm new here album, 2010.

<https://goo.gl/UFmp6T>



I think it was my mum,
who told me on the phone,
that my grandma has died.

I was surprised.

I thought there will come a resolution
between my mum and her mum,
the final scene,
where all will become clear,
tears will flow,
And they will fall into each other's arms.

I thought there is still time,
To talk about her life and mine,
To meet my grandpa with her eyes,
Hear how she survived the war,
and how she didn't.

Confused and distracted,
I waited for the real thing to start,
With some solid place and time,
When we'll become full-blooded characters,
There will be linear rising action,
We'll have problems and address them,
We'll find solutions,
perhaps not without twists and turns.

We carried on, and she stopped one day.

* * *

I was away when it happened,
and they gathered and gave her to the earth.

Many times, politely and somewhat mechanically,
I would greet her to say hello and goodbye.
We exchanged schematic expressions,
We didn't learn the language of our own thoughts and feelings,
They remained mute, living their rich lives
unbeknownst of each other's existence, like life in different galaxies.

Next time I arrived at the house she stayed in,
Where three next generations live,
And dig their own moats between them,
I walked to the cemetery,
Like a pilgrim,
Like someone seeking advice from oracle,
Like a visitor.

When I stood over her grave,
And recalled her in my memories,
It appeared to me she was lost and confused,
And it was on me now,
To find better ways.

Later on I thought maybe I misunderstood that moment,
As it didn't occur to me, things can be beyond my imagination.

* * *

In parallel to this action I have sensed
Air of great relief and release
Her death brought to her children.
This elderly woman,
Taking pills and walking carefully down the stairs,
Seemingly spending long hours alone in her room praying,
What power did she held over her children?

I'm guessing, from the distance of next generation,
That it is a child's wish to be loved by their parents.
Craving that seems not to grow old.
Once a child, always a child.

* * *

I was told:
"Although my mother might have planted only one tree in my garden,
I'm able to extract as many blossoms as I can."
Perhaps there were no trees in my mother's garden.



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I am sure that in the confusion and tiredness of this moment I am forgetting to mention here people who are very important for me and for whom I have unending love. The way memory works is at times erratic, whimsical and capricious. Forgive me, I love you.